



Language learners' perceptions of having two interactional contexts in eTandem

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to gain insights into how language learners perceive two online interactional contexts and how these perceptions impact the learners' participation in eTandem learning. This study incorporated pair work with group discussion as interactional contexts, connecting Korean language learners with English language learners. Pair work included online chatting and personal blog writing where each pair exchanged feedback on one another's L2 writing. Group discussion included interaction among all the participants in a group blog where they discussed weekly topics. The study found that individual participants differently perceived the effectiveness of the two interactional contexts: some thought that both contexts were helpful together for developing L2 skills and for acquiring cultural knowledge, while others thought that these two contexts together were not as effective as expected. These perceptions affected not only the participant's own participation in the project, but also others' participation. This study offers pedagogical implications for ways in which researchers can further improve the design of eTandem learning.

Keywords: Learners' Attitudes, Sociocultural Theory, Telecollaboration

Language(s) Learned in this Study: English, Korean

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Introduction

Grounded in a sociocultural approach (Gee, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978), this study attempted to explore language learners' perceptions of online contexts in eTandem learning, one telecollaboration learning method that allows two native language speakers to exchange linguistic and cultural expertise for second language (L2) learning. In the sociocultural approach, eTandem learning is a promising learning method since it offers an interactive learning environment where individual learners' knowledge can be shared. As an independent agent, an individual learner may have unique learning needs and preferred learning styles, which are foci of the sociocultural approach to learning. These individual differences can lead learners to perceive the effectiveness of learning environments, including online contexts, differently (Lee, 2009; Thorne, 2003; Ware, 2005). As Hauck (2010) argues, individual learners' perceptions of online contexts significantly contribute to the quality of their online communication. Individual learners' views of online contexts are thus an important factor for successful learning. The current research aims to gain insights into L2 learners' perceptions of two online contexts (i.e., pair work and group discussion) in eTandem learning. The study incorporated these two contexts in order to facilitate social interaction with other learners in eTandem learning. By exploring how language learners evaluate the two contexts, the study aspires to give guidelines on how to effectively provide a better online context for L2 learners. The study addresses the following questions:

1. How do L2 learners perceive the usefulness of having both pair work and group discussion?
2. How do L2 learners' perceptions of the two contexts contribute to their level of participation in online activities?

Literature Review

Sociocultural Approach to Learning

The current study is grounded in a sociocultural approach, which views learning as an interactive and collaborative process (Gee, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Learners do not gain knowledge by processing information by itself, but rather through social interaction (Donato, 2000). In addition, learning is not a socio-cognitive product that can be applied to all individual learners uniformly, but a process where individual learners' differences and agencies are taken into account as highly valued components (Kinginger, 2004). These differences are critical, because they can contribute to language learners' perceptions of learning environments. Especially in online environments, language learners' interpretations of the learning context can affect their communication. This claim conforms to the argument developed by Lamy and Hampel (2007): "It is not just the materials affordances of CMC that play a role in enhancing or limiting communication, but also how people see them and the practices that result from their different perspectives" (p. 43).

According to Lamy and Hampel (2007), individual differences should be considered in language education, since individual learners' different ideas about learning environments can significantly affect their learning. Drawing on the close relationship between learners' perceptions and L2 learning, this research views successful online L2 learning as a combination of L2 learners' perceptions of and engagement in online contexts. This understanding inspired me to design an eTandem study that focused on the ways in which participants perceived the online contexts in relation to their learning.

eTandem Learning

Electronic tandem, often called eTandem, is defined as online "language learning [in which] two learners of different native languages work together to help each other learn the other language" (Cziko, 2004, p. 25). As the term *tandem* implies, the most common interactional context in eTandem studies is one-to-one pair work. The advantage of this interaction is that L2 learners can establish closer relationships through frequent interactions with their partners (Ushioda, 2000) and receive peer feedback (Kabata & Edasawa, 2011; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). For instance, Ware and O'Dowd (2008) conducted an eTandem study between Spanish learners and English learners. The participants liked their partners' linguistic feedback that they felt was different from what they could receive in traditional classroom settings. One participant pointed out the following: "Maybe it's more interesting by the net [online]. You are chatting so you are enjoying. If the teacher gives me a corrected essay, I just read it and that's all" (p. 53). This quote suggests the importance of peer feedback based on a collaborative relationship with peers via online networks.

Although pair work provides a space for authentic interaction with a partner, some eTandem studies have included an additional interactional context, group discussion, while creating more spaces for interaction between L2 learners (Lee, 2009; Vinagre, 2005). A unique feature of group discussion is that it allows L2 learners to exchange ideas with multiple people while avoiding situations where a limited number of partners are the only reference to the target culture for L2 learners—situations that can result in narrow perceptions of the target culture and dominate L2 learners' overall online language exchange experience (Schenker, 2012).

For example, Lee (2009) conducted a study including pair work and group discussion that connected Spanish learners with English learners. Participants were particularly satisfied with the experience of discussing topics with the target language speakers because it helped develop their ideas about specific topics. One participant explicitly appreciated having multiple viewpoints on a topic, saying, "It was so interesting to hear different voices talking about a very important topic concerning global warming. I liked the way you presented your thoughts. I think it is difficult to collect different viewpoints within one debate" (p. 433).

Lee (2009) explained that sharing ideas with others through blogging was not only good for learning

intercultural knowledge but also good for developing critical thinking.

Method

Participants

The data in this article come from a larger study that focuses on the online interactions of eight pairs of adult L2 learners, aged 21 to 45. In the larger study, adult English language learners from Korea (ELLS) and Korean language learners from the US (KHLs¹) studied the target language and its culture while interacting with one another. The study included a one-to-one partnership, the typical form of partnering in eTandem studies, combined with group discussions. The researcher paired each KHL with an ELL, based on the L2 proficiency of the participants and their preferred types of language partner based on an interview and the data gathered from a questionnaire. Five of the participants were college students, while the others were either full-time workers or housewives. Participants' self-rated L2 proficiencies ranged from beginning to advanced levels in reading and writing.

The current study followed a multiple case study design, allowing the researcher to reach “a very thorough analysis” in order to capture individuals' perceptions and experiences of online contexts (Duff, 2008, p. 43). The current study focuses on four participants, two KHLs and two ELLs (see [Table 1](#)), because they had contrasting perceptions of the two interactional contexts, which suggests that these cases can demonstrate a range of variation in perceptions among participants.

Table 1. *Demographic Information of Focal Participants*

Name	Type	Age	Gender	Occupation
Younghee	ELL	31	Female	Housewife (who was previously a doctor)
Sara	KHL	32	Female	Doctor
Chul	ELL	32	Male	Post-doctorate researcher
Diane	KHL	33	Female	Housewife (who was previously a designer)

Note. Pseudonyms are used.

Data Collection

Prior to the online exchange, participants were first asked to fill out a questionnaire inquiring about their language proficiency, L2 learning experience, and preferences regarding language partner characteristics. The questionnaire was followed by the first face-to-face interview. After exchanging introductory e-mails with their partners in the first week, participants were asked to complete four weekly tasks from Week 2 to Week 11 in order to help improve their L2 skills and cultural knowledge (for details, see [Table 2](#)). At the beginning of each week, the researcher posted the topic of the week and participants were asked to engage in the two interactional contexts: pair work and group discussion.

After 11 weeks, the participants filled out a second questionnaire regarding their experience in the study, followed by the second face-to-face interview. Additionally, the researcher conducted online chat interviews with each participant biweekly in order to clarify participants' writings in the blogs and chat scripts. Each chat interview lasted between a half hour and two hours. This setting also functioned as a communication tool between the researcher and the participants, helping the researcher receive feedback from the participants.

Table 2. Procedure and Tasks

Timeline	Procedure	Task Type	Task Description	Tool
Week 1	E-mail exchange	Pair work	Please exchange e-mails with your partner in either language.	Gmail
Weeks 2–11	Personal blog post	Pair work	Please write your thoughts and experiences about the weekly topic in your personal blog using your L2.	Blogger
	Online chat	Pair work	Please discuss the weekly topic based on the discussions in your personal blogs. You can ask additional questions or further discuss the topic. Please chat in one language for half of the chat session and in another language for the rest of the session, totaling a minimum of 30 minutes (e.g., 15 minutes in English and 15 minutes in Korean).	Google Talk
	Group discussion	Group work	Please leave a comment or post a new entry regarding the weekly topic in either language.	Blogger
	Reflective diary	Individual work	Please share your experiences with online learning in either language after you finish all three tasks. In order to fully express your emotions and experience, you are asked to write a minimum of 200 words.	Gmail

Data Analysis

Participants' writings (blog posts and chat scripts), pre-questionnaires, post-questionnaires, and interviews were analyzed. Additionally, member checking was used to increase the validity of the research.

Most data, such as participants' blog writings and chat scripts, were automatically generated and saved, and the researcher retrieved them later for analysis. However, the face-to-face and online interviews were transcribed and translated to English by the researcher. The data showed that the participants followed the instructions for each task, including adhering the language requirements for each. Regarding online chat sessions in particular, all the partners used both their first language (L1) and L2 equally, as was evidenced in the chat scripts.

The researcher conducted an inductive qualitative analysis for the research questions, using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Since the two research questions were related to one another, the researcher was constantly seeking themes that emerged from students' writings in relation to the research questions. Once the researcher made a list of themes in the students' writing data, the researcher grouped these by category and utilized the list of themes to code the interview data. These themes were repeatedly refined by collapsing related themes into single themes. For example, once all posts containing the specific viewpoints of a context were identified (the first research question), the participants' online activities in relation to their participation were carefully analyzed (the second research question). During this process, important themes emerged, such as the usefulness of the two contexts, the degree of depth in feedback, and the repetitiveness of the two contexts.

Results

This section discusses four participants who possessed contrasting perceptions of the two interactional

contexts. These participants' perceptions fell into two groups: one group viewed the two contexts as complementary and necessary, while the other group viewed the two contexts as non-complementary and unnecessary.

Viewing the Two Interactional Contexts as Complementary

Younghee (ELL) and Sara (KHL), who viewed the two interactional contexts as complementary, found that the pair work enabled them to develop L2 skills, while the group discussion played a critical role in developing ideas. These participants believed that the learning advantages of one context compensated for what was lacking in the other context. Although the two participants thought that the two contexts were advantageous, Sara and Younghee had slightly different ideas about what led to those advantages. Younghee attributed the different advantages to the number of interlocutors with whom she could interact in each context. Sara believed that the different advantages were derived from which language she could use in each context.

Younghee thought that one-to-one interaction versus many-to-many interaction created different benefits in each context, as stated in an online interview (see [Excerpt 1](#))

Excerpt 1.

Younghee: Since our pair work happens in one-to-one interaction, we can concentrate on one another's saying easily. If I compare the pair work with the [group discussion board], there are a lot of conversations happening in the same space in the [group discussion board], which is almost overwhelming? Something like that -.-;; (online interview; April 25, 2015; translated)

In pair work, where she communicated with her partner, she could focus on language use. One reason may be that Younghee was able to receive her partner's undivided attention on her English writing, because she was her partner's only interlocutor. Younghee was "satisfied with [her partner's] feedback" because she believed that her partner's feedback could improve her "incorrect [L2] usage" (online interview; April 25, 2015; translated). In contrast, this specific benefit of the pair work was not present in the group discussion, because the participants' attention was distributed among the group members due to the larger number of participants.

At the same time, Younghee acknowledged that the group discussion could have been advantageous because it provided access to different viewpoints of the weekly topics (see [Excerpt 2](#)).

Excerpt 2.

Younghee: Because of the [group discussion board], [I] became aware of different views and opinions on weekly topics. This could be another aspect of being overwhelmed with so much information ⇒ It [group discussion board] has conflicting qualities. Without the [group discussion board], [my partner and I] might lose the purpose of the pair work. I might question why I am doing this in isolation from the larger group. (online interview; April 25, 2015; translated)

Younghee recognized the benefits of interacting with multiple people, because she gained broader perspectives and was able to focus on the purpose of the activity. Based on her conversation with her partner, she was able to develop her ideas while communicating with other participants in the group discussion.

As she came to recognize the benefits of each context, Younghee participated actively in both contexts as a regular contributor. She made comments on every post on the group discussion board, which was beyond the minimum requirement of one post per week. She also seemed to engage seriously in the pair work. She included photos, YouTube videos, and news articles in her personal blog writings.

Sara, on the other hand, attributed the different advantages in the two contexts to which language she could use in each context. The pair work allowed her to develop L2 skills by requiring her to only use

her L2, while the group discussion helped her focus on developing ideas by allowing her to use her L1. In her comment in [Excerpt 3](#), Sara first demonstrated how pair work helped her improve L2 skills.

Excerpt 3.

Sara: *[My partner] has been very helpful. The most helpful thing is the correction of my blog. Because I'm already familiar with it so I learn my mistakes better.*

Researcher: *Because I'm already familiar with it so I learn my mistakes better?? What do you mean?*

Sara: *I mean since I already knew what I wanted to say I can focus on the grammatical mistakes. It's hard to notice all the grammar rules if I'm reading something I can't even understand.* (online interview; April 24, 2015)

Sara noted that she was able to focus primarily on grammatical feedback in the pair work because she was familiar with what she wrote.

However, as an L2 learner of Korean, it was not easy for Sara to write in an L2. In her last online interview, she expressed that Korean writing “was one of the harder tasks because it was in Korean” (June 21, 2015). When she had difficulty in expressing her ideas in Korean, she deliberately wrote a “superficial answer” (see [Excerpt 4](#)).

Excerpt 4.

Sara: *But sometimes as my thoughts took me deeper, I wanted to express them but couldn't in a second language. So I tended to stick with somewhat more of a superficial answer. Because it was easier that way.* (online interview; June 21, 2015)

However, in the group discussion where she was able to communicate in either an L1 or L2, this struggle seemed to be mitigated. She described the group discussion as her favorite task in an online interview: “I liked [the group discussion] the most I think. Of course in English it's easy. But I got to express myself and think about what I wanted to say on a more complex level” (June 21, 2015). Her choice of the words *of course* and *easy* suggest that when she was writing in an L1, she might have felt less anxiety about miscommunication and might therefore have been able to develop ideas in depth. When she began to use her L1, she felt that her writing contained more complex and fewer superficial ideas. She was able to express in an L1 what she could not express in an L2. In other words, the group discussion played a critical role in developing, as well as debriefing, what she thought and learned.

As such, Sara thought that the pair work complemented the group discussion by allowing participants to see the productive potential of utilizing linguistic skills of both the L1 and the L2. She believed that both contexts were beneficial for her and she actively participated in these two contexts. She confessed that she spent several hours writing her personal blog since she wanted to make an interesting post. Many participants left comments on her writing and they often reflected on what Sara posted in their own writings, suggesting that Sara played a role as a facilitator of the group discussion. Thus, Sara's perception of utilizing both interactional contexts affected not only her active participation in both contexts but also other participants' participation.

Thus, participants who positively perceived the two interactional contexts found that both contexts were useful. Together, the two contexts better afforded participants the opportunity to develop L2 skills and ideas than they could individually.

Viewing the Two Interactional Contexts as Non-Complementary

Some participants did not find it beneficial to engage in both interactional contexts. These participants preferred one context over the other and believed that either one would have been enough on its own. Chul (ELL) and Diane (KHL), especially, demonstrated specific negative views about the two contexts.

Since participants were asked to discuss each weekly topic in four tasks, Chul thought that he did not have enough new ideas to write about in each task: “I don’t have much to say regarding the same topic” (online interview; April 26, 2015, translated). He argued that it seemed unnecessary to have both pair work and group discussion, since both contexts required participants to write about the same topic and were too repetitive to him. Chul also expressed his concern regarding the time necessary to complete the four tasks (see [Excerpt 5](#)).

Excerpt 5.

Chul: *Chatting, writings in the two blogs [personal blog and group discussion], reflective journal...I have to do at least these four tasks and I feel I have to devote too much time to these tasks every day. I am consistently thinking about this project more than I expected.*

Researcher: *Do you mean that it is a positive experience to practice English everyday or it is a negative experience and feels burdensome?*

Chul: *I think it feels like a burden. If I complete one task per day, it still takes four days.* (online interview; April 26, 2015, translated)

In the interview above, Chul complained that he had to spend more time doing the weekly tasks than he had thought he would have to. His view that the tasks were unnecessary and time-consuming led him not to engage actively in all the tasks, but rather to select and focus on what he thought would be the most useful for him. He thought that personal blog writing in the pair work included all the features he wanted without unnecessary interaction with many people. Thus, he engaged in personal blog writing the most, but he did not actively participate in the group discussion. Compared to his writing in the personal blog, his writing in the group discussion only covered superficial knowledge with less than five sentences per post. Chul confessed that he did not fully participate in the group discussion (see [Excerpt 6](#)).

Excerpt 6.

Chul: *I did not read all the posts [in the group discussion board]. If I had a hard time deciding the direction of my writings, I just looked for some references, reading others’ posts. I also looked at other participants’ expressions.* (online interview; July 10, 2015, translated)

His selective reading of others’ posts and less-active participation in the group discussion seemed to be affected by his goal for participating in the current research, which was found in his reflective diary. In his journal, he mainly reflected on the L2 skills he learned. Thus, it seemed apparent that his goal was the development of L2 linguistic skills rather than the exchange or development of ideas by interacting with other participants.

Diane displayed a similar negative view of having to participate in the two contexts at the same time. She did not interpret both contexts as complementary. She did not think there was a big difference between the group discussion and the individual writing activities (see [Excerpt 7](#)).

Excerpt 7.

Diane: *I didn’t see much difference between writing my blog, writing a community blog and a diary. Some weeks, I felt some of the things I could’ve written were all interchangeable between the three tasks.* (online interview; July 2, 2015)

[Excerpt 7](#) shows her evaluation of the three tasks as *interchangeable* to her. She did not specifically prefer one to the other, but her online engagement showed that she did not participate in the personal blog as much as she did in the group discussion. She did not feel the pair work was very useful to her, as revealed in an online interview. She minimized the helpfulness of her partner’s feedback, saying that “[it was] perhaps a little [helpful]” (July 2, 2015). Compared to most participants who found their partner’s feedback very helpful, her negative evaluation of her partner’s feedback was rather unusual. Like Chul,

Diane also held similar opinions regarding the effectiveness of utilizing the two interactional contexts at the same time.

Thus, participants who evaluated the effectiveness of the two interactional contexts to be non-complementary felt that the two contexts were repetitive and that they did not need to be included together. These negative views were reflected in these participants' less-active participation, also affecting their overall gains. Chul and Diane did not feel that the two contexts helped their L2 development and idea development.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study, which explored participants' perceptions of having both pair work and group discussion in eTandem learning, found that the participants' perceptions of the two interactional contexts were influenced by whether they felt that the contexts were helpful toward achieving their goals or not. Depending on individuals' needs and preferences, participants' perceptions of the online contexts can differ, significantly affecting not only their participation, but also other participants' experiences.

As previous eTandem studies have shown (Kabata & Edasawa, 2011; O'Dowd, 2005), Sara and Younghee found utilizing the two contexts helped them develop their L2 skills and cultural ideas. These benefits fit well into these learners' aims of participating in the research, in that they believed that having the two contexts improved their L2 skills. The first group's positive perceptions of including different contexts corresponds to the findings of the study by Yang and Chen (2014), who showed the advantages of multiple contexts in an E-pal technology-enhanced project. Similar to their findings, the cases of Younghee and Sara concretely demonstrated the multiple benefits of having different contexts for developing their language skills. On the other hand, Chul and Diane did not find benefits of having the two contexts, because they felt that the contexts were not helpful for reaching their goals for participating in the study.

The negative perceptions of Chul and Diane presented challenges to this study because they affected not only the participation of Chul and Diane, but also other participants' online language experience and the overall result of the study. In particular, less-active participants adversely affected regular contributors. Sara stated, "I wanted to participate more but I didn't want to dominate the conversation...Actually I became a little shy too" (online interview; June 21, 2015). Sara explained that she noticed that not all members actively participated in the group discussion, making her feel like she dominated it. Sara's case indicates that her participation was affected by the contributions of other participants. Indeed, by the end of the study, Sara's participation became less active.

This study contributes to online L2 research in several ways. First, it attempted to maximize the benefits of practice of eTandem learning by incorporating pair work and group discussion. Second, the results showed that individual learners possessed different opinions about online contexts. Their views on online contexts can affect their learning and the learning of others. This supports the need to take into account individuals' aims and motivation in language learning—a practice that conforms to a sociocultural approach to learning. In this approach, individual learners are active agents who participate in creating knowledge with their own purposes (Vygotsky, 1978). This study is not meant to suggest the perfect model of eTandem learning, but rather one alternative to the traditional form of eTandem learning. The current study, which was situated in a specific context with a limited number of participants, presented only one type of eTandem learning.

Building upon the findings, I provide some implications for instructional practices. First, I suggest that educators include multiple contexts, such as pair work and group discussion, in eTandem studies, possibly affording different benefits to L2 learners. Yet, researchers should be cautious to include too many tasks using multiple contexts. It could overwhelm participants, as seen in Chul's case. Researchers might consider making it possible for participants to choose which tasks they want to complete based on their goals for learning. Second, I suggest that L2 researchers who study online contexts consider a qualitative

approach to explore participants' learning. As the current study suggests, individual differences can significantly affect one's own learning as well as others' learning—something that is difficult to capture with a quantitative approach. It is hoped that this study has provided new insights into implementation of online research. Given the number of technological advances in the field of L2 education, a more careful approach to incorporate different online contexts is necessary.

Notes

1. KHLs in this study referred to students learning Korean as their heritage language.

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