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# 8 The social dimension of learner autonomy in a telecollaborative project: a Russian course for apprentice engineers

Elsa Chachkine<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2019), many of today's skills will not match the jobs of tomorrow. Lifelong learning and learning to learn are thus crucial. The Conservatoire des arts et métiers (Cnam) language centre has for a long time had this ambition. Although the approach was at first learner-centred and based on individual-focused learning processes (social support being provided solely by teacher-advisers), current research has shown a social shift (Cappellini, Lewis, & Mompean, 2017; Lantolf, 2013; Little, 2000) with the rediscovery of social theories on learning (Bruner, 1975; Clot, 1999; Lantolf & Thorne, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, the social web offers new affordances such as “commenting, linking, co-authoring, revising, remixing, sharing, [and] liking” (Blin, 2012, p. 79), thus providing new forms of online interaction and possibilities for collective activities. However, students need to be prepared for online participation, as “processes, methods, and strategies of effective language learning should be taught more explicitly in order to improve self-directed learning” (Vandergriff, 2016, p. 241).

The main objective of this exploratory research is to investigate how the social dimension of the Russian course sustains autonomisation and whether

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it supports the development of language, cultural, and other skills needed by 21st century apprentice engineers. The aim is also to enrich practices and try to improve the course in terms of student guidance, learning, and well-being, following an action research process that seeks transformative change through the simultaneous process of taking action and conducting research (Stringer, 2008). To do so, I will first examine the rationale of the course in light of the literature, combining sociocultural theory with the paradigm of autonomous learning through the lens of self-determination, self-regulation, and self-efficacy theories, which is an original theoretical basis for language learning research in France. Following a qualitative approach, I will then analyse the data collected to explore how the social dimension manifests itself and its impact in terms of learning.

## 2. Theoretical anchoring of the Russian course

### 2.1. Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT)

According to SCT (Vygotsky, 1978), human developmental processes take place

“through participation in cultural, linguistic, and historically formed settings such as family life and peer group interaction, and in institutional contexts like schooling” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007, p. 197).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). For Vygotsky (1978), “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 88). Learning collaboratively with others in instructional settings precedes and shapes development, hence the importance of educational mediation by peers and experts in the Russian course for the apprentice engineers’ development of language skills and learner autonomy.

## 2.2. Learner autonomy

Since Holec (1981) first described learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3), it has been generally agreed that conscious, critical reflection, choice, and decision-making are key elements (Little, 2000; Murphy, 2014). A major criticism of this position is its reliance on an individual perspective. To address this, I introduced reflective peer group workshops and one-to-one counselling sessions with myself as a teacher-counsellor (henceforth referred to as learner-tutor scaffolding exchange sessions). Moreover, the emotional and relational aspects of the learning process need to be taken into account. Indeed, autonomy depends on the development of a learner’s psychological and emotional ability to monitor their own and others’ emotions (O’Leary, 2014; Salovey & Mayer, 1990), the ability to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in a constructive way (Kohonen, 1992; O’Leary, 2014), and the value of responsibility to others in a social context (Kohonen, 1992; O’Leary, 2014), in addition to displaying empathetic behaviours, controlling one’s anxiety, and encouraging oneself and others. Taking emotions into account in autonomous learning therefore requires metacognitive skills but also meta-emotional skills (O’Leary, 2014); these types of skills are highly valuable in the professional world (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001; Sackett & Walmsley, 2014) and are described as key competences for the 21st century to be promoted in the framework of language training (ACTFL, 2011).

## 2.3. Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002), a theory of motivation and human development, provides an explanation regarding the power of active learner involvement. In this theory, the notion of ‘choice’ is central to autonomous behaviour. Motivation is underpinned by three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Freedom of choice is fundamental and is supported by the desire to be at the origin of one’s own behaviour, the need for effectiveness, and the need to have confidence in achieving desired outcomes. It is also supported by the need for learners to experience “positive and mutually satisfying relationships, characterized by

a sense of closeness and trust” (Haerens, n.d., para 3). In the Russian course under study, a great freedom of choice was offered, as well as the possibility of being in contact with speakers of the target language and culture of about the same age.

### **2.4. Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) and sense of self-efficacy**

Motivation, however, is not enough. According to Schunk and Zimmerman (2008), post-decision processes require that action be regulated until the goal is achieved. SRL refers to the process by which learners personally activate and sustain cognition, affects, and behaviors that are oriented toward the attainment of learning goals (Shunk & Zimmerman, 2008). A common and crucial factor in both initiating learning and persisting is Bandura’s (1986, 2001) self-efficacy theory. If people do not think they can produce the results they want by their actions, they have little reason to act or persevere in the face of difficulties (Bandura, 1986). Personal self-efficacy judgements are primarily derived from lived or vicarious experiences and, to a lesser extent, from verbal persuasion. Consequently, seeing peers succeed, receiving encouragement from them, and encouraging other learners to make their learning experience a positive one can enhance learners’ senses of personal self-efficacy.

Having shown in our theoretical anchoring how the combination of sociocultural theory, motivational theory, and a theory of human agency are important when considering learner autonomy, I now turn to telecollaborative learning – a pedagogical approach that encompasses many online exchange practices for language learning.

### **2.5. Telecollaborative learning**

Pedagogically structured online collaborative learning initiatives between learners in different geographical locations are known as telecollaborative learning (Dooly, 2017; Dooly & O’Dowd, 2018). Language learning in tandem is well-founded in theory and well-researched (Brammerts et al., 2002; Lewis &

Walker, 2003; Tardieu & Horgues, 2020), and today teletandem exchanges allow virtual exchanges as part of telecollaboration. The relationship between tandem and self-study learning was established in the late 1980's. Autonomous tandem language learning in the context of self-training language learning trends was then enriched by scaffolding exchanges with a tutor to support tandem language learning at the organisational, educational, and social levels (Brammerts et al., 2002; Lewis & Walker, 2003).

Technological accessibility has contributed to an increase in telecollaboration, but other factors also justify its success, namely

“the widespread acceptance that intercultural awareness and intercultural and interpersonal communicative competences are extremely important for foreign language learning; the need for an interactive approach through cognitively challenging, meaningful use of language that goes beyond the classroom walls; and thirdly, the fact that language learners must gain combined skills of communicating in multiple languages and through multiple modalities” (Dooly & O’Dowd, 2018, p. 21).

Developing cultural references about other cultures and putting one’s own culture at a distance (Zarate, 1986), being curious and prepared to suspend disbelief about others’ cultures and belief about one’s own (Byram, 1997), learning to organise exchanges in a multicultural environment and being able to make them last, and maintaining contact are important skills for learning how to learn a language throughout life and are core work skills, according to the ILO.

Telecollaborative projects require practitioners to coherently sequence both in-class and out-of-class activities and ensure appropriate metacognitive scaffolding. This implies designing appropriate, interconnected tasks (Dooly & O’Dowd, 2018).

In light of these theoretical issues, this exploratory research sets out to investigate the extent to which the social dimension of the Russian course facilitates learning.

### **3. Russian course under study**

#### **3.1. Participants**

On the French side they were students from the Cnam ( $n=8$ ), most of them apprentice engineers, who were getting ready to spend six months in Siberia. On the Russian side, the Novosibirsk State University (NSU) students were either future teachers of French or Russian, or students majoring in biology, mathematics, or physics who were going to spend a mobility period in France the following year.

For the Cnam apprentice engineers, learning a second foreign language was optional, but taking the Russian course was highly recommended for those who would study in Russia because they were complete beginners in Russian. On the Russian side, the students were of at least B1 level in French, and their participation in the telecollaborations was optional; Russian students chose their course from among several options, and their work was graded. I am aware that telecollaborations are based on mutual exchanges, but within the limits of this chapter, only data from the Cnam students are analysed.

In addition to being the designer of the course, I was also the tutor trainer and researcher who collected and analysed the data. The immersion of the researcher in the context in order to understand the actors is a strength of this study. So is my ability to distance myself from the analysis (Groulx, 1999). The researcher involved in action research is aware of the necessity for distancing and can observe an empathic neutrality (Patton, 1990).

#### **3.2. Learning objectives**

The learning objectives were multiple: develop the learners' language skills as well as their knowledge of Russian culture, provide them with intercultural experiences, and prepare them for their mobility period in Siberia and future professional lives. Following the tradition of self-access centres (Kronenberg, 2017; Little, 2015; Rivens Mompean, 2013), another objective was to develop

the learners' skills in learning a language autonomously. The approach was expanded to social networks and telecollaboration with speakers of the target language.

The Cnam students were free to choose their learning objectives, but the majority wanted to learn how to read Cyrillic, be able to communicate in simple everyday situations, and develop some knowledge of the culture. Therefore, the following were required: a basic mastery of Russian pronunciation (stressed and unstressed vowels for words of more than two syllables, learning of velar phonemes [hard] or palatalised phonemes [soft]; [Cubberley, 2002](#)), a minimal understanding of inflexional morphology, and acquisition of everyday vocabulary.

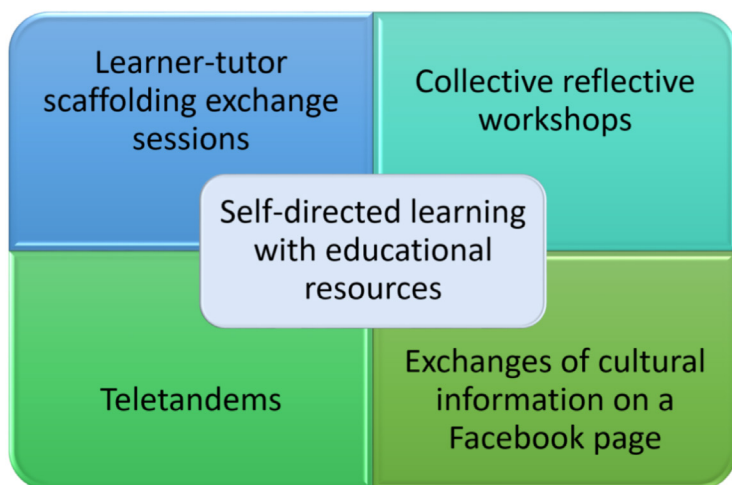
### **3.3. Course organisation**

For their one-semester period of self-directed learning, students were provided with a supportive social environment, metacognitive support, and educational resources (as summarised in [Figure 1](#)):

- three 45-minute learner-tutor scaffolding exchange sessions organised throughout the semester;
- two reflective workshops, each lasting two hours – one at the beginning of the semester and one at the end;
- five teletandem sessions of 50 min with a Russian student at the Russian partner university, which the students will attend during their mobility period;
- a Facebook page for all Cnam students ( $n=8$ ) and Russian students ( $n=8$ ) who participate in teletandems, where they can share and exchange cultural information; and
- educational resources such as Russian language textbooks, a logbook, and sheets designed to help structure teletandems.



Figure 1. Self-directed learning in one's social environment



### 3.4. Learner-tutor scaffolding exchange sessions

Scaffolding exchange sessions were usually face-to-face with me as a tutor, held at regular intervals, and ‘non-decision-making’ (Gremmo, 1995). In line with the self-determination theory and without prior knowledge of the learners’ needs and desires, as teacher-counsellor, I helped the learners make choices and would not make choices on their behalf.

During the first session, the learners were asked to:

- assess their knowledge of the target language and culture;
- identify realistic learning objectives;
- think about how to schedule the teletandem sessions;
- choose educational resources with respect to the objectives;

- reflect upon the organisation of their self-study (time slots dedicated to self-study, place where self-study will be performed); and
- reflect upon learning strategies they have used, implement personal tricks for learning better, in line with learning self-regulation.

In Sessions 2 and 3, the learners were asked to:

- talk about the educational resources they have used for self-study;
- discuss the teletandem sessions carried out, the information shared on the collective Facebook page;
- evaluate learning outcomes and the strategies implemented to learn;
- set new objectives;
- choose new educational resources; and
- test new learning strategies that I suggested as teacher-counsellor.

Through attentive listening, I invited the learner to speak about their learning and the learning processes in which they were involved. A number of tips were provided so as to support the learners' motivation, to help ensure the exchanges with the tandem partner would last, or to help decipher posts from Russian students on the Facebook social page. I also gave a great amount of encouragement to the learners.

### **3.5. Collective reflective workshops**

Two reflective workshops were scheduled, one at the beginning and one at the end of the semester. The first workshop was designed to present the different elements of the project to the Cnam students ( $n=8$ ), introduce the Russian students to the French students via a videoconferencing tool, and start

thinking collectively about how to learn a language in a self-training setting, working on the basis of recommendations (identified and shared by students who experienced a similar training arrangement the year before, collected and edited beforehand).

During the second workshop, every student wrote out an assessment of their learning and the learning processes they had experienced, specifying what had been achieved and what was less successful, and presented this orally. The students then collectively developed a recommendation sheet for future students in the course with tips about how to avoid pitfalls. This allowed every participant to formalise the experience, share learning strategies, and promote vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1986, 2001). The second part of the workshop was dedicated to a collective analysis of the cultural information exchanged on Facebook, to further students' reflection on how to learn a language in a self-training setting as well as in the teletandem arrangement and how to take advantage of social networks.

### **3.6. Telecollaboration**

In this context, Cnam students and students from the NSU in Russia cooperated to learn each other's native tongues, gain knowledge of both cultures, and gain from an intercultural experience.

For the Cnam students, the teletandem exchanges would later be followed by face-to-face exchanges, as they would be moving to Siberia. On the French side of the arrangement, students had several supporting elements to sustain their learning: the two reflective workshops, the individual scaffolding sessions with me, a logbook, and worksheets they could complete with their Russian tandem partner. The sheets, designed for complete beginners in Russian, provided activities to help them develop their ability to read and pronounce words with their partner, suggest dialogue simulations, ask questions about student life in Siberia or questions on differences in 'ways of being' and attitudes (e.g. what is the rudest thing for you: smoking in someone's home, not taking off your shoes when you are invited in someone's house, or not

saying thank you?). Teletandem partners were asked to consult each other to choose the videoconferencing tool they would use. Students could decide to use audio communication only. They could also use text chat to complement oral communication.

All participants also shared information on a Facebook page. Students took turns posting cultural information (a film, text, video, photo, song, etc.) from their home country that they considered important and then justifying their choice. Each post was either about an element of culture shared by most people or about an element of culture personally valued by individual students. An explanation was expected. Great freedom of choice was offered in this activity, which is consistent with [Deci and Ryan's \(2002\)](#) self-determination theory.

Posts could give rise to asynchronous written comments asking for additional information or expressing analogies or dissimilarities. Students were strongly encouraged to comment on posts published by others. This space was intended to federate all students and expand their network of contacts so that exchanges with native speakers would not be limited to their tandem partners. It was also intended to encourage collaboration with more capable peers in the target language and culture, in line with sociocultural theory.

Such activities were designed to foster meaningful use of language that goes beyond classroom use of participants' interpersonal and existing intercultural skills. They also provided opportunities for developing a combination of skills in communicating in multiple languages and through multiple modalities (oral communication by videoconference, text and asynchronous text writing on Facebook), as well as learning to learn a language with a speaker of the target language, which is consistent with the core competencies for lifelong learning identified by the ILO.

### **3.7. Educational resources**

Textbooks could be borrowed for the duration of the training period. Selected learning sites and language learning applications were also suggested.

A logbook given during the first exchange session included several sections to be completed by the student during the sessions and throughout the semester:

- self-assessment of Russian language skills, knowledge at the beginning of the course, and prior self-directed language learning experiences;
- learning objectives and resources used, to be completed during the sessions;
- a schedule of teletandem sessions to be carried out over the semester;
- a section on strengths and weaknesses, successes and difficulties experienced; and
- a ‘validation’ section, which includes all the elements that are required for the course to be validated; this helps students to ensure their ‘training contract’ is fulfilled.

The logbook was to be brought to the scaffolding sessions. It was shared with me and constituted an essential element of the learner-tutor sessions. It helped raise awareness and promoted the diversity of contexts and uses of language appropriation by promoting reflection on them.

## 4. Methodology

The course design, in connection with the theories presented, will now be explored through the two research questions that resulted from the theoretical construct.

- How does the social dimension of the course manifest itself? How does it sustain autonomisation?
- How does the social dimension support the development of language skills, as well as cultural and relational knowledge?

I present the data collected in an attempt to provide answers to these questions.

#### **4.1. Data collection**

The approach is qualitative: the research is designed to come as close as possible to an accurate understanding of autonomisation and of learning processes made possible by the course design. It also aims, with an interpretative perspective, to ensure that the experimentation is understandable by taking into account meanings given by the actors (the students; Paquay, 2006). Data obtained during the course (logbooks, learner-teacher Sessions 2 and 3, the last reflexive collective workshop, exchanges on the Facebook page) and data generated for the purpose of the study (an anonymous questionnaire at the end of the training, an anonymous questionnaire administered four months post training) were used. I worked from:

- logbooks (8);
- transcriptions of learner-teacher scaffolding exchange Sessions 2 and 3 (16)
- anonymous Questionnaire 1, given at the end of the course (eight responses),
- transcriptions of the last reflexive collective workshop discussions; and
- anonymous Questionnaire 2, given four months after the end of the course asking students about their feeling of personal effectiveness in learning languages after this experience, their practice of self-directed learning, tandems, and Russian social networks (seven responses).

#### **4.2. Method**

A semantic analysis (Bardin, 1997) of the exchange sessions and reflective workshop was conducted, and the presence or absence of the following elements was checked:

- traces of motivation, satisfaction, and self-regulation. Particular attention was paid to identifying traces of social motivation, intrinsic motivation, emotional well-being, volition, how an activity was made more meaningful, and self-efficacy, in line with the self-determination theory (Reeve, Ryan, Deci, & Jang, 2008) and self-regulation theory (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2008);
- traces of autonomous learner actions (setting goals, planning learning activities, selecting relevant resources, evaluating resources and strategies, keeping track of time and place of learning), in line with research on learner autonomy (Holec, 1981; Lewis, 2014; Nogueira, O'Connor, & Cappellini, 2017); and
- traces of emotional involvement and, in particular, how the students exercised control over the affective dimension (O'Leary, 2014, p. 20), their ability to monitor their emotions and others' emotions (O'Leary, 2014, p. 20), how they empathised with others, their ability to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in a constructive way (Kohonen, 1992, p. 19), how they lowered their anxiety, and how they self-encouraged (Oxford, 1990, p. 21).

The anonymous questionnaire administered following the training period provided information on:

- self-efficacy belief<sup>2</sup>; and
- self-directed learning with teletandems.

In order to understand the learning potential (as regards language skills, cultural knowledge, intercultural awareness, and interpersonal skills), data from the following were explored:

- logbooks;

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2. Questionnaires 1 and 2 are given in [supplementary materials](#), Appendix 1.

- scaffolding exchange sessions: analyses of students' ability to read, stress syllables and reduce nonstressed syllables, very basically communicate, and demonstrate cultural and intercultural awareness, as well as the relationships they built and the network they developed or did not develop;
- Questionnaire 1 at the end of the course: impressions on the different components of the course, learning; and
- Questionnaire 2, given four months after the end of the course, also provides information about interpersonal skills (are you still in contact with your tandem partner? If so, have you already met your tandem partner)?

Some results are discussed in the following section in relation to the research questions.

## **5. How does the social dimension manifest itself? Does it support autonomisation?**

### **5.1. Main indicators of a social dimension of autonomy**

#### *5.1.1. Teletandems: social motivation and intrinsic motivation for the activity*

During the individual exchange Sessions 2 and 3, when the students were invited to report on their learning and I asked them, “tell me about what you have learned over the past few weeks”, the eight students all immediately talked about the teletandems: “uh... I’m on my third exchange with my tandem partner... We completed the sheet, the second one, we went over the pronunciation and introducing oneself again”<sup>3</sup> (Student 1 [ST1], Session 2). And if a teletandem had to be cancelled for technical reasons or because of organisational problems

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3. The students' quotations were translated from French into English. The quotations in their original French are shown in [supplementary materials](#), Appendix 2.



either on the French or Russian side, the student would be frustrated and lose motivation, which was the case for two students: “I haven’t heard from him for a while, he stood me up two or three times, well [laughs] it did affect my motivation a bit, I wasted some time as I spent an afternoon waiting, so I didn’t do a tandem” (ST8, Session 2).

For students who practised teletandems ( $n=6$  at the beginning,  $n=7$  at the end of the course), the tandem partners helped them work on their reading and pronunciation, and they simulated short dialogues and helped students develop knowledge about culture. This is shown by the logbooks and questionnaires: “during the tandems, she really helps me to correct my pronunciation, she tells me how to stress words correctly... We also spoke with Russian ST1 (ST\_RUS1) about the mentality of young people in Russia nowadays” (ST1, logbook); “list of learning with the teletandem partner: sheets (reading, pronunciation and basic communication) and cultural exchange with my Russian tandem” (ST3, logbook).

The practice of teletandems seemed to be an essential social motivation factor for the students. It was recognised as both a precursor to self-regulatory development and a vital component of students’ current efforts to self-regulate (adaptive forms of help seeking; e.g. [Ryan & Deci, 2000](#)). The relationship with the tandem partner seemed to play a strong motivational role and also had a regulating effect. This, however, seemed to be dependent on a positive relationship that the students managed to maintain (or not) with their partners. It is reflected in the scaffolding sessions and some logbooks that when the relationship had been friendly, warm, and lasting, the students described their experience positively, expressing the desire to continue once the course was over. Otherwise, they tended to lose motivation, even interrupting their self-directed learning:

“I was lucky to have a friendly tandem partner; it is a very interesting way of exchanging because we have the opportunity of communicating with a person whose mother tongue is Russian. Moreover, we gain confidence and learning becomes more interesting and unconventional. I intend to continue to keep in touch with my partner. It is a perfect method for me” (ST2, logbook).

The social motivation that made it possible to seek help or support, as well as to be and remain motivated, also provided the pleasure of being able to help and cooperate: “I had asked her for short expressions and short sentences, ‘how much does it cost’, everyday sentences, and then she asked me to train her a bit because she had an oral test, a French test, she often asked me ‘is it correct to say it that way’, it was nice, it was really both ways” (ST6, session 2).

Teletandems also seemed to be a strong source of intrinsic motivation, as the notions of “pleasure” and “interest” were frequently mentioned in the exchange sessions or in the reflective workshop:

“she’s great, she’s highly reactive, in fact she’s the one that helps me practise, she helps me practise pronunciation THOROUGHLY, she’s good at challenging me, we’re going to have our third teletandem on Sunday, it’s once a week, no, it’s GREAT” (ST8, Session 3).

The question of strong motivation provided by these exchanges was expressed by seven out of eight students in their answers to Questionnaire 1. To the question “how would you describe the exchanges with your tandem partner”, the terms “fun” and “enriching” are both given four times each, most often together, or they are qualified as “positive”, “warm”, “friendly”, or “stimulating”.

Finally, the experience of managing teletandems generated many emotions. Beyond the pleasure they had in cooperating, the fondness they had of their tandem partner, or the pleasure they had in helping, students learned to “monitor their emotions” and “to lower their anxiety” when it came to having their first tandem meeting with a stranger: “it’s a bit, uh... unsettling to find yourself facing a person you don’t know. At first it feels a bit weird as you click and then ALL OF A SUDDEN he answers!” (ST5, Session 2).

#### *5.1.2. Oral cognitive and metacognitive reflection*

Only the list of points that were completed with students’ tandem and the teaching resources used for self-directed learning were noted in the logbooks.

There was no mention of new objectives, no evaluation of progress, and not even any assessment of their learning strategies or their ability to organise their learning. It was only in the context of exchange sessions or during reflective workshops that, at my request, students evaluated their learning and the teaching resources they had used, expressed their new learning objectives, and sometimes evaluated learning strategies they had applied.

ST6 and tutor, Session 2:

T: Fine, and what are your goals?

ST6: Well, uh, to be able to read some signs when we get there. To be able to get by with the little vocabulary I have without uh... having to use English to make myself understood.

ST3 and tutor, Session 3:

Yes, by the way, I had a manual that you sent in pdf format, it's good, that one helped me a little, it's well done, it guides you step by step, it avoids going too fast right away, whereas I had a textbook with vocabulary but as it doesn't give pronunciations, it's not really... the best.

Similarly, reflections on cultural information that was posted, cultural comparisons, or intercultural awareness were never written down in the logbooks or in the comments of Facebook posts. Instead, reflections were expressed verbally during the exchange sessions after I invited students to do so.

ST4 and tutor, Session 3:

T: There was a sign that I found interesting in the demonstration. There was a young girl who wrote [on a sign]: "I love my mother, but she didn't come [to the demonstration against the government in office]". That means...

ST4: Her mother doesn't agree with that. Both generations disagree, the daughter protests, the mother doesn't.

Or the following discussion that invites the student to compare cultural aspects, ST5 and tutor, Session 2:

T: So it's true that almost all Russians have seen this film. Would there be an equivalent in France or in the French-speaking world?

ST5: Uh there's *Les Visiteurs* or *Les Bronzés* or *Brice de Nice...*

It is through dialogue, through sustained guidance, and through oral verbalisation that learning processes can become conscious – that choices, decision-making, and incipient critical reflection are made possible. It is reasonable to assume that without this personalised support, no cognitive or metacognitive thinking would have taken place, which demonstrates the importance of intentionally designed learning environments to stimulate qualitative developmental changes.

## **5.2. From external regulation to integrated regulation**

Finally, it is interesting to note that organisational or metacognitive suggestions, as well as recommendations related to the evaluation of learning resources that I may have mentioned during exchange sessions, were integrated by the students: students recommended to other students the suggestions I had previously given. This occurred during the activity that aimed to draw up a list of recommendations to be communicated to future students who would take the course the following semester. During the final workshop, in response to the question “What advice would you give to students who, like you, will take this course, and on the other hand what would you recommend they should avoid?” they answered as below.

“Don't let the deadline approach, be persistently self-disciplined in your work”.

“Don’t focus 100% on tandems. You still have to take time to work on your own”.

“To plan them [teletandem sessions] from the beginning and to have good quality internet connection”.

“One thing to do is to prepare the sheets well before the tandem”.

I made all of these recommendations during scaffolding exchange sessions (Session 2 with ST2, ST3, ST7, ST8; Session 3 with ST1, ST6), as illustrated in this exchange between a student and me: “It might be worth working on your sheets before you get on the tandem” (tutor to ST6, Session 2).

### **5.3. Intrinsic motivation for cultural information exchange on Facebook**

All the posts made on the Facebook page were viewed in turn and seemed to be very much appreciated by the students. In Questionnaire 1, the following terms were used to characterise them: “interesting”, “enriching”, or “constructive” together with the term “fun” in five out of eight answers. It was also confirmed during the exchange sessions that the posts were considered genuinely interesting: as ST7 stated, “yes, it’s interesting to know what software Russians use”. The notions of interest, pleasure, and lightness of the posts appeared most important to them. However, as noted previously, very few comments were posted in reaction to posts on the Facebook page, for drawing comparisons, asking for additional information, analysing the post. Facebook posts were used as a support for teletandem discussions, as shown in this excerpt from an exchange session in which ST6 talked about how his partner gave him explanations on a post during a teletandem:

ST6 and tutor, Session 2:

T: It’s a pity, they didn’t say how things were going in Russia, it would have been interesting to know.

ST6: I asked ST\_RUS6 and she told me that it's not easy to practise sports in Russia, that they don't have many sports facilities there, that's what she told me.

Even though the material posted on the Facebook page shared by all the French and Russian students was only followed by a few written comments, the space provided and the sharing of cultural information played important roles in the students' intrinsic motivation. The choice of information to be posted was carefully thought out and may have been prepared at length (ST2, for example, specifically took a tour-boat cruise on the Seine river in Paris and found out information about the monuments so as to be able to comment on the main buildings, and then filmed and commented on the tour to share the video with the group on the Facebook page). Freedom of choice combined with the desire to please seemed to motivate the posting.

#### **5.4. Does this social environment sustain autonomisation?**

The social environment proposed in this course, in particular teletandems and to some extent telecollaborations via Facebook, seemed to have a catalytic effect on learner motivation. The exchanges between learners had an impact on social motivation (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2008, p. 19) by nurturing the basic psychological need for relatedness – that is, the need for learners to experience positive and mutually satisfying relationships, characterised by a sense of closeness and trust and allowing students to live human experiences and to engage in affects (friendship, cooperation, reciprocity, altruism), which is a source of pleasure and recognition. The other effect of social motivation was the impact it had on self-regulation, helping to maintain efforts during the course but also the wish to continue self-directed learning and learning through teletandems once the course had ended (seven out of eight wished to continue learning through tandems, Questionnaire 1; four out of seven continued self-directed learning four months after the end of the training period, Questionnaire 2). It would seem, therefore, that social processes were recognised as both precursors of human self-regulatory development (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2008) and as vital components of current efforts to self-regulate (Karabenick, 1998).

On the other hand, the inherent interest that students seemed to have in telecollaboration activities, as well as the great freedom of choice offered (choice of goals, resources, learning times, places, and cultural information posted, etc.) can be regarded as a form of intrinsic motivation, given the expressions of interest, pleasure and light-heartedness associated with these activities. Intrinsic motivation is based on students' inherent interest in the activity itself and is associated with enjoyment and inherent satisfaction in a task activity. "Intrinsic motivation can strengthen students' sense of autonomy" (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2008, p. 16), their need to feel for example a sense of personal control or self-agency, and their willingness to learn in a self-regulated way. The students' intrinsic motivation was also fostered by my support as the teacher, through which I sought to develop their autonomy rather than to control their behaviour. According to Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, and Ryan (1981, p. 16) when teachers provide significant autonomy support but little behavioural control, their students become more intrinsically motivated for learning, feel more competent at learning, and develop a higher level of self-esteem. This could explain why six out of seven students felt more competent in learning a language after their learning experience (Questionnaire 2).

With regard to cognitive and metacognitive skills, the students experienced self-directed learning, organised their teletandems, cooperated, managed their emotions, reflected on the organisation of their learning, set achievable goals with my help, chose resources, and looked for strategies to learn better and to stay motivated. It is important to note that prior to this experience, none of the students at the Cnam had experienced self-directed language learning, and none had used social networks to learn a foreign language, nor foreign-language networking sites or social networking sites for language learning (Questionnaire 1). The guidance offered (exchange sessions, reflective workshops) to support self-directed learning was essential. Indeed, the lack of previous experience, combined with the fact that many students lacked confidence in writing in French (despite my encouragement, there were no written records in the logbooks and few written comments on the Facebook page) made the support essential to initiate reflection. Educational mediation and guidance by an expert and peers did at least allow students to orally verbalise choices, decision-making, critical

reflection, and learning processes. The verbalisations of learning processes may have contributed to giving learners a sense of greater control over their learning process and encouraged them to continue learning.

## **6. Does the social dimension sustain learning?**

### **6.1. Language learning**

The students engaged cognitively and emotionally in group activities. Indeed, a majority continued learning Russian after the course and felt more confident in learning a language, but their language learning was limited. Six out of eight students had great difficulty reading Cyrillic at the end of the course. During the last exchange session, when they were asked to read in order to assess their learning, students had difficulty in deciphering Cyrillic. However, the two students who went through self-directed learning before starting their teletandems very late in the course (ST4), or even only at the end of their training period (ST8), read Cyrillic well and had mastered very basic communication (greeting; introducing oneself very simply; asking where a monument, a bus, or a subway station is; understanding numbers from 0 to 20). This shows that self-directed learning is crucial and that without it, learning outcomes are limited; in addition, with teletandems alone, language learning is not sufficient. However, we note that the students who participated in teletandems had good pronunciation (properly stressed vowels in particular), probably due to the fact that they had worked on their oral expression with their Russian partners. It is also worth noting that three students who, in addition to French and English knew another language (Tamil, Bantu languages) that was spoken by their parents, were at ease in pronouncing Russian (ST1, ST2, ST4), see [Table 1](#).

It seems that self-directed learning was largely overlooked by six out of eight students, and five out of eight students focused only on teletandems and seemed to be working on their Russian only on this occasion. In the recommendations they give during the last reflexive workshop, they suggested, “do not focus



100% on tandems” or “before the exchange, train properly for the exchange, for example if you are working on reading, start by first working on your reading alone, do not start during the tandem”. I also note that some students who chose not to follow the teletandem sheets (ST5 and ST6) did overly complicated tasks in Russian and were not able to remember the sentences suggested by their Russian partner (ST6) or completed tasks at much too fast a pace (ST5).

Table 1. Overview of student learning in Russian

Students	Teletandem practice	Self-directed learning	Easy reading (without help and reading after less than 5 s of reflection)	Basic mastery of Russian pronunciation (stressed and unstressed vowels, etc.)	Communicate VERY simply
ST1	YES	Little work	NO	YES	YES
ST2	YES	Little work	NO	YES	YES
ST3	YES	Very little work	NO	YES	NO
ST4	Started late, after 2 months	YES	YES	YES	YES
ST5	YES	Very little work	NO	YES	NO
ST6	YES	Little work	NO	YES	NO
ST7	NO	Very little work	NO	NO	NO
ST8	Started at the end of the course	YES	YES	NO	YES

## 6.2. Cultural and intercultural learning

With regard to the opportunities to learn about Russian culture and French students’ own culture made possible by the exchange of cultural information on the Facebook page and by the teletandems, seven out of eight said they developed their knowledge of Russian culture (Questionnaire 1; workshop; exchange

sessions). Knowledge shared on the Facebook page included landscapes, food and cooking, the fact that some Soviet films are still important references in today's cinema, the absurd tone of 'Art Freedom Cats', and the political activity of young Russians through an event called 'Monstration', which is a parody of May 1st with fairly explicit banners such as "further north than Korea". The post that was an explicit criticism of the current regime helped Cnam students to realise during the workshop that speech is not totally muzzled in Russia: it is a mocking way to say "will Russia turn into a sort of North Korea or the other is more explicit [laughs] it's starting to stink [laughs]" (workshop).

It should be noted that these exchanges of cultural information and teletandems gave rise to some intercultural awareness. Three students out of eight said that after the course they had a different representation of Russians and that they no longer had negative misconceptions about them: "Russians are not as cold as they seem", "I saw that they were very open" (Questionnaire 1), or that the course had helped them change their representation of Russia, initially imagined as a dark country where the sun never shines: "Otherwise they do have sunshine despite all the rest [laughs], he [his tandem partner] was clearly in the sunlight!" (workshop).

Finally, as students were asked to post cultural information that they considered important to share, the choice of the information to be published caused some cultural awareness during exchange sessions or during the workshop: Students in France did not easily find French-speaking cultural references to share, and their musical references, series, films, etc., were more naturally drawn toward Anglo-Saxon cultural references. They also became aware of the preeminence of American culture, unlike Russians, who had their own search engines, social networks, etc.: "It's different from here, it's not Google in the lead" (workshop).

### **6.3. Relational learning**

As previously mentioned, the relationship with the tandem was the first point raised by the students during the scaffolding sessions. There was a constant assessment of the quality of the relationship with their partner: "he's pretty nice

[laughs] we HIT IT OFF really well” (ST5) or “it’s good to have a tandem partner that you get along with... You enjoy what you’re doing” (ST2). As [Nogueira et al. \(2017\)](#) observed, it seems that “for the tandem to be successful in terms of learning, it should be also successful on the social level of the partnership” (p. 81). The fact that a ‘successful tandem relationship’ has an impact on ‘successful tandem learning’ was discussed during the exchange sessions and reflective workshops in order to mitigate this dependence. This is a point of particular attention worth discussing at the very beginning of the course.

Nevertheless, the dependence on the tandem partner did not prevent students from extending their network to other French and Russian students. Students became ‘friends’ with Russian students on their personal Facebook pages. As I suggested or at the request of their Russian tandem partner, the Cnam students also joined the Russian social network VK, an equivalent of the Russian Facebook site, in order to build a network of Siberian ‘friends’, a network in which Russian students were much more active. Three out of eight students were registered on VK at the end of the training period, and five out of seven were registered four months after the training ended (including three active students with 20 ‘friends’). I also note that half the students are still in contact with their tandem partners four months after the end of the training period (four out of seven; Questionnaire 2), but the students no longer carry out teletandems. The objective of broadening the network of relationships between Russian and French students was therefore a success that led students to implement the professional skill of ‘learning to learn’ a language by relying on the network of relationships and also, for those who would spend time in Russia, to facilitate their integration.

## 7. Discussion

While aware of the limitations of this study due to the fact that Russian student data were not included in the analysis, I consider the study to reveal that the telecollaboration environment, individual and collective guidance, freedom of choice, and availability of educational resources enabled students to engage

cognitively and emotionally in their learning; to reflect on learning processes, organisational processes, language, and culture; and to develop moderate language and cultural skills, as well as to have their first intercultural experiences.

What seems most striking is that the young adults had the desire to continue learning by themselves and with their tandem partners after the end of the course: More than half of them said they continued learning (four out of seven), and six out of seven a few months after the course felt more confident in learning a language. It seems that the freedom offered and the social environment proposed, as well as the guidance they received, helped to motivate the students intrinsically, provided a positive experience in which the students were the main actors of their learning, and helped them feel competent and experience relatedness. These results are consistent with the work of [Deci and Ryan \(2002\)](#) and [Deci and Flaste \(1996\)](#) on the theory of self-determination, for whom autonomy is one of the three basic needs that must be satisfied to achieve a sense of self-fulfilment and to embrace an activity with a sense of interest and commitment. The other two basic needs are competence and relatedness. People have a feeling of competence when they confront and successfully overcome “optimal challenges” ([Deci & Flaste, 1996](#), p. 66), and they experience relatedness when they love and are loved by others ([Deci & Flaste, 1996](#), p. 88). Achieving the three needs not only provides a feeling of self-fulfilment, but also seems to have an impact on learning regulation and the sense of self-efficacy.

In our study, we also observed that students strongly focused on their tandem partners, the question of language learning in self-study being placed in the background and individual cognitive involvement noticeably neglected by six out of eight learners. Students concentrated their attention on the telecollaboration, teletandems in particular. It is likely that the self-directed learning of Russian went beyond their ZPD and that they had entrusted the regulation of their learning to the tandem partner. As [Kohonen \(2010\)](#) clearly notes, “[t]he tasks that pupils can do on their own are within their area of self-regulation. The development in the zone thus proceeds from other-regulation to self-regulation, towards increased autonomy” (p. 6). Since the students were complete beginners in the target language, self-directed learning certainly made learning more complex.

This is confirmed by Little, Dam, and Legenhausen (2007), for whom “learner autonomy is inseparable from the learner gradually developing target language proficiency” (pp. 16-17), meaning that “the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency are not only mutually supporting but fully integrated with each other” (p. 15). This is an improvement to be made to the course so that telecollaboration does not replace self-directed learning but remains complementary. This can be achieved by either strengthening guidance at the beginning of the course or offering an online training course for an introduction to Russian that would leave freedom of choice, continue to allow students to manage their learning, and be just as flexible as the current course.

In terms of professionalisation, the Russian course and its social multicultural environment allow the development of linguistic and cultural skills required in a globalised world. The course also teaches valuable 21st century skills that include promoting initiative and self-direction, seeking opportunities to use language beyond the classroom, and social and cross-cultural skills (ACTFL, 2011), which include emotional skills (e.g. self-knowledge, empathy, self-control, helping others) that are essential for cooperating with others and solving conflicts in a constructive way (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001; Sackett & Walmsley, 2014). These skills will be put to the test during the professional training in Russia.

## 8. Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this study tends to show that training in a language and culture and learning autonomy in language learning in a supportive social environment are beneficial. It also supports the need to refocus on autonomous learning and to reconsider the concept in light of technological developments.

The questions this study raises are twofold: praxeological and methodological. The first would aim to understand (via a longitudinal study and more precisely than through a questionnaire) how students continue self-directed learning or do not, with or without the help of tandems and social networks, for Russian as well

as for other languages or subjects. Another avenue for future research would be to analyse the path that leads French students from the Facebook network to the Russian social network VK and, once they are on VK or on another Russian social network, the activities they carry out and how they take or do not take advantage of the network to learn. Another future research perspective would be to measure the impact of the course when on work placement abroad.

In terms of methodologically related research questions, addressing the issue of autonomisation in relation to social environments seems the obvious perspective to adopt, although it is methodologically complex to apprehend. I chose to combine self-determination, self-regulation, and self-efficacy theories (which are very seldom used in language teaching in France) with the paradigms of autonomous learning and emotion management. This interweaving of complementary theories is an approach I wish to further develop.

## 9. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/uitubpqofbx3h2okqbxjr2rq283jjtod>

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