

## Cultivating Language Learning Through Cultural Sensitivity and Empathy. An e-Tandem Case Study of Mexican and Canadian Students

### Impulsando el aprendizaje de lenguas a través de la sensibilidad cultural y la empatía. Un estudio de caso sobre e-Tandem entre estudiantes mexicanos y canadienses

Raquel Acosta Fuentes<sup>a</sup>, Andrea Valdiri<sup>b</sup>

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#### Abstract:

This article examines how cultural sensibility and empathy towards the interlocutor foster language learning and intercultural competence. We analyzed the results of an e-Tandem program conducted between a private high school in Vancouver, Canada, and a public high school in Mexico City. The program consisted of two phases: the first involved a series of online letter exchanges, as well as the exchange of handwritten letters and souvenirs; in the second, participants engaged in virtual meetings through a video conferencing platform.

We collected data through surveys that captured challenges, language strategies, and cultural insights; video recordings of student interactions; facilitator observations; and student-created artifacts such as letters, postcards, and gifts. Despite the significant differences in the participants' backgrounds, a key finding of the study was that the process of writing letters, receiving and replying to them provided students with a valuable space for reflection. This allowed them to learn from others but, most importantly, to learn about themselves. We found that cultural sensitivity involves identifying differences, acknowledging similarities, and, above all, valuing one's own culture. This foundation helps students negotiate intercultural encounters, know how to address topics they find challenging, and develop a genuine interest in others.

#### Keywords:

*Cultural competence, cultural sensitivity, e-tandem, teenage language learners*

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#### Resumen:

Este artículo examina cómo la sensibilidad cultural y la empatía hacia el interlocutor fomentan el aprendizaje de idiomas y la competencia intercultural. Analizamos los resultados de un programa e-Tandem realizado entre una escuela privada de nivel bachillerato en Vancouver, Canadá, y una escuela pública del mismo nivel en la Ciudad de México. El programa integró dos fases: la primera incluyó una serie de intercambios de cartas en línea, así como el intercambio de cartas escritas a mano y souvenirs; en la segunda, los participantes se encontraron en reuniones virtuales a través de una plataforma de videoconferencia.

Recopilamos datos a través de encuestas que dieron cuenta de los desafíos, estrategias lingüísticas y percepciones culturales señaladas por los participantes; grabaciones en video de las interacciones de los estudiantes; observaciones de los facilitadores; y artefactos creados por los estudiantes, como cartas, postales y regalos. A pesar de las diferencias significativas entre los participantes de ambos países, un hallazgo clave del estudio fue que el proceso de escribir cartas, recibirlas y responderlas proporcionó a los estudiantes un valioso espacio para la reflexión. Esto les permitió aprender de los demás, pero, lo más importante, aprender sobre sí mismos.

Encontramos que la sensibilidad cultural implica identificar las diferencias, reconocer las similitudes y, sobre todo, valorar la propia cultura. Esta base ayuda a los estudiantes a negociar los encuentros interculturales, saber manejar los temas que les son difíciles de tratar y a desarrollar un interés genuino por los demás.

#### Palabras Clave:

*Aprendientes adolescentes, e-tandem, competencia cultural, sensibilidad cultura*

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<sup>a</sup>Raquel Acosta Fuentes, Colegio de Ciencias y Humanidades Vallejo | Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México | Ciudad de México | México, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4870-7785>, Email: [raquel.acosta@cch.unam.mx](mailto:raquel.acosta@cch.unam.mx)

<sup>b</sup>Andrea Valdiri, Crofton House School | Vancouver-British Columbia | Canada, <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2040-2248>, Email: [AValdiri@croftonhouse.ca](mailto:AValdiri@croftonhouse.ca)

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## **Introduction**

Language learning is often seen as a technical process involving grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, but its potential goes far beyond from mere linguistic competence. In our current globalized world, the ability to communicate across cultures is becoming increasingly important. A major challenge in language education is not only teaching students to speak a new language but also fostering an understanding of the cultures in which it is spoken. e-Tandem programs have gained popularity as they offer a valuable opportunity for students to approach language learning from a broader perspective. While Tandem language exchanges are recognized as effective environments for developing both language skills and cultural awareness, these benefits do not occur automatically and require thoughtful planning (Godwin-Jones, 2019).

This article explores how a group of high school students from Canada and Mexico strengthened their language skills and intercultural competence through an e-Tandem program that included letter and gift exchanges, as well as synchronous online interactions over the course of a school year. Learners from Canada had different levels of proficiency in the target language, while Mexican students were at a basic level. The combination of asynchronous and synchronous encounters allowed participants to take responsibility for their counterparts. Interactions were purposeful, enabling deeper conversations. The program, however, did not limit the possibility of interacting with others beyond the pen pals.

Letter exchanges provided a basis for reflection and negotiation during synchronous interactions. Online meetings offered opportunities to apply the insights gained from these reflections. The program highlighted that developing cultural sensitivity is essential for intercultural competence. Participants not only recognized cultural differences but also gained a better understanding of their own identities. This self-awareness helps transform perspectives, enabling more effective negotiation and mutual respect during interactions.

## **Literature Review**

Researchers have highlighted that e-Tandem interactions enhance participants' language skills in various ways, including improvements in fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary usage (Wu & Marek, 2008). Engaging in e-tandems also allows students to expand their cultural knowledge, embrace diversity, and deepen intercultural awareness (Griggio, 2018; Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016; Wang-Szilas et al., 2013). Through authentic conversations with native speakers, they gain firsthand

insights into the target culture (Escribano & Gonzales, 2014; Resnik & Schallmoser, 2019). Participants particularly value this exposure to a different culture (Wu & Marek, 2008).

However, developing language skills and intercultural competence requires active engagement and self-reflection. It is a continuous, lifelong process that involves navigating linguistic and cultural challenges, shaped by personal experiences with diverse cultures. Addressing these challenges effectively is key to fostering mutual understanding, making intercultural skills essential for individuals from various backgrounds (Raluy & Szymańska-Czaplak, 2020; Byram, 1997; Bennett, 2004; Deardorff, 2004).

Before acquiring intercultural competence, learners must first cultivate cultural sensitivity, which is the foundation of understanding and interacting respectfully across cultures (Raluy & Szymańska-Czaplak, 2020; García & Lee, 2020). Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) define cultural sensitivity as the ability to recognize and appreciate cultural differences while fostering empathy in cross-cultural interactions. Individuals with cultural sensitivity acknowledge the existence of cultural variations without assigning value judgments such as good or bad, superior or inferior, or right or wrong. They embrace their own culture's unique traits while recognizing that it is not inherently superior to others (Bennett, 1986, 1993).

The Mexico-Canada e-Tandem program was designed to provide learners with opportunities to explore, experiment, negotiate, reflect, and learn in a real-world communicative context. The experience described in the following pages offers insights to the ongoing understanding of cultural sensitivity and language learning.

## **Mexico-Canada e-Tandem Program**

The Mexico-Canada e-Tandem program was carried out during the 2022-2023 school year. Over this period, fifty-five Canadian students (ages 14-18) and eighty-eight Mexican students (ages 16-18), with varying levels of proficiency, took part in the program.

## **Schools and Participants**

Two educational institutions were involved: Crofton House School (CHS) in Vancouver, a private all-girls school, and Colegio de Ciencias y Humanidades (CCH) in Mexico City, a public coeducational high school. CHS students come from diverse backgrounds, many of them with Asian heritage, and typically belong to high-income families. In contrast, CCH students are predominantly from Mexico City or nearby areas. They typically live with one or both parents and siblings, and their families generally belong to middle- to low-income households.

At CHS, Spanish is part of a three-year program and is usually the third or fourth language for students. Their proficiency levels range from A1 to B2. At CCH, English is taught as a foreign language to help students reach university-level goals, with an expected proficiency level of A2 (CEFR). While some CCH students had higher proficiency, most were at A1 or lower.

Tandem exchanges are integrated into the curriculum at CHS. At CCH, however, they are offered as an extracurricular activity and are voluntary, given the larger number of participants in Mexico.

The Mexico-Canada e-Tandem program included both written correspondence and three 70-minute synchronous Zoom sessions, each centered on culturally significant dates:

**First Meeting:** Held in late October, coinciding with Halloween and El Día de Muertos, students explored the traditions and customs associated with these celebrations.

**Second Meeting:** Conducted in February, the session highlighted Saint Valentine's Day and Chinese New Year, fostering discussions about love, friendship, and cultural diversity.

**Final Meeting:** In mid-May, students reflected on their overall experiences in the program, sharing their personal and cultural learnings.

Throughout the Zoom sessions, teachers constantly monitored the interactions, providing guidance or clarification when needed. In case of technical difficulties or absences, teachers actively participated as tandem partners to ensure the continuity and effectiveness of the exchanges.

Due to the participants' differing levels of language proficiency, facilitators organized the meetings into 10-minute segments: five minutes for practicing English and five minutes for Spanish. This structure proved effective, as it enabled students to learn and adapt gradually throughout the activity. In addition, this setup allowed participants not only to interact with their pen pals but also to engage with other students. These interactions gave them the opportunity to expand on topics previously discussed in their letters, hear diverse perspectives, clarify the meanings they wanted to express, and refine their own viewpoints.

The written exchange unfolded in three stages:

**Introduction Letter:** In early October, participants introduced themselves, sharing basic information about their lives, interests, and backgrounds.

**Holiday and Reflection Letter:** In December, classrooms transformed into workshops where students crafted handwritten-greeting cards and small souvenirs, reflecting on their personal growth over the year and extending holiday wishes to their counterparts. The cards and gifts were mailed and arrived in January.

**Wrap-up Letter:** Leading up to the final meeting, participants wrote their third letter, reflecting on their experiences in the

e-Tandem program. They expressed gratitude to their partners for their collaboration and shared key insights gained through the program.

Teachers supported students during the exchanges by guiding them through the writing process, helping them structure and reply to letters, organizing practice conversations, and offering materials to enrich the topics discussed in the online meetings. Their active presence in each session helped ensure that all students could take part meaningfully, even when facing logistical challenges.

## Methodology

The data analyzed in this study is drawn from four primary sources: self-reflection surveys, video recordings of student conversations, observations by online meeting facilitators, and students' artifacts. After each online session, participants were invited to complete self-reflection surveys detailing the challenges they encountered, the language strategies they employed to navigate difficulties, and any cultural insights gained. Students' artifacts, including online letters, postcards, and gifts, provided further insights into their linguistic proficiency, emotional engagement, and cultural competence.

## Findings

The e-Tandem program brought together Canadian and Mexican students, who initially approached the experience with excitement, anticipation, and some apprehension. Despite initial nerves, the program provided opportunities for authentic cultural exchange and language learning.

### Cultural Exchange and Festive Traditions

Conversations between Canadian and Mexican peers provided authentic information beyond what students learn in class.

**Día de los Muertos (DDL M) and Halloween:** In the surveys, students pointed out distinct focus of these two celebrations. DDL M is not centered on spooky themes but rather on celebrating life and remembering departed loved ones. Some Mexican students honor this tradition by creating elaborate altars (ofrendas) adorned with decorations, flower petals, and food. Halloween is widely celebrated in Vancouver, even on the school grounds, with haunted houses, treats, and decorations.

### Gift Exchange and Correspondence

Canadian and Mexican students exchanged handwritten-greeting cards and handcrafted-souvenirs, fostering cultural understanding and appreciation. This exchange played a key role in enhancing global awareness and empathy among participants. Canadian students valued the tangible connection to Mexican culture, especially through gifts like candy and photos that offered a glimpse into the daily lives and traditions of Mexican teens. Mexican students were delighted by the souvenirs, including a Canadian flag, and

expressed their gratitude through a letter. The exchange left an everlasting impact, triggering a newfound passion for Spanish among Canadian students and a desire to explore Canadian culture further among Mexican students.

### Winter Holidays Comparisons

Through colorful imagery and personal narratives, Canadian and Mexican students were exposed to each other's cultural practices and perspectives while broadening their own. Canadian students embrace winter vacations by showcasing them in a colorful zine featuring pictures of their international trips to Hawaii, Japan, China, and their local escapades to the ski resorts. Mexican students initially felt discouraged by Canadian students' vacations, contrasted with their limited travel experiences. However, they shifted their perspectives, valuing their seasonal work or cherished memories with family and friends during this special season. Valentine's Day and Chinese New Year

Many Canadian students with Chinese heritage provided Mexican students with the opportunity to learn about Canadian traditions, such as the celebration of Chinese New Year. This exposure deepened Mexican students' understanding of the multicultural aspects of Canadian culture. They were particularly intrigued to discover that this year marks the Year of the Dragon, a symbol of good luck believed to bring growth, positive changes, and prosperity to individuals and communities. For some Canadian students, this celebration involves visiting close family members, especially grandparents. This cultural exchange expanded Mexican students' awareness and inspired curiosity about their peers' traditions.

While Canadian students observe Chinese New Year, Mexican students celebrate Valentine's Day. Mexican students often engage in conversations about romantic relationships, ideal partners, and crushes, but Canadian students do not usually participate in these discussions. Instead, they learned to navigate these cultural differences by proposing alternative topics, such as the significance of traditions, fostering a respectful dialogue and greater intercultural understanding.

### Language Breakthroughs

The program helped Mexican students improve their language skills, achieving fluency in understanding rapid questions, overcoming shyness, and speaking with confidence. Meanwhile, Canadian students reported increased confidence, motivation, improved listening and pronunciation skills, and a greater interest in learning vocabulary and grammar.

Students noticed a clear improvement in their confidence, feeling more at ease and less hesitant to speak, even when talking with native speakers. The supportive environment provided by their language-learning partners also played a crucial role in boosting their confidence.

Students employed various strategies to improve communication, such as speaking slowly and using simple,

everyday words. They focused on key phrases and occasionally translated specific terms for clarity. Repeating questions and practicing pronunciation were common techniques, and asking others to speak more slowly helped them keep up with the conversation. Through these efforts, they gradually gained the confidence to handle more complex expressions and situations.

### Discussion

Participants in the e-Tandem underwent a process that initially generated interest in each other and then fostered openness to discover, learn, and inquire about one another. The first written and online encounters provided a context for sharing what mattered most, particularly aspects of school life. The subsequent interactions offered an opportunity to express positive sentiments through winter wishes, fostering gratitude, openness, and a desire to exchange experiences. These interactions led to significant discoveries about each participant's own culture as well as that of others. Letter exchanges facilitated thoughtful reflection and provided a platform for negotiation before synchronous engagement.

Throughout the activity, participants were guided to think critically about their writing and the assumptions they might unconsciously make. For example, it was common for students to mention aspects of their school life, favorite foods, or places they visited without providing sufficient context. Facilitators encouraged them to recognize the cultural nuances embedded in these references and to explain them in ways their counterparts could understand. This process helped participants learn the importance of not taking shared cultural knowledge for granted.

On the other hand, reading their partners' letters and responses offered valuable opportunities for reflection and cross-cultural comparison. When students encountered unfamiliar expressions or surprising experiences or ideas, they sought guidance from their teachers and classmates to understand and address their feelings or confusion. This process was essential in helping them develop culturally appropriate ways to engage with their partners.

During the exchanges participants had a positive attitude towards their interlocutor, as evidenced by the questions they asked to show interest in their partner's comments and the remarks they made to express agreement on certain topics. This can be seen in the following example from the initial letter exchange:

Mexican girl: *my favorite animal is butterfly I say this because mean too much in a part of my life.*

Canadian girl: *Las mariposas son muy interesantes y bonitas ¿por qué la mariposa te importa?*

As they read through the letters, students found certain excerpts that prompted reflection on their own experiences. Mexican students found:

Mexican student 1: *She says she practice rowing.*

Mexican student 2: *She says she does ice hockey; I don't practice any sports. What can I say...?*

Teacher: *Why don't you talk about the activities you do, not*

*necessarily sports?*

Mexican student 3: *She says she has been to Mexico, and on vacation she traveled to Hawaii, I just don't have anything to say...*

Canadian students found:

Canadian student: *I don't want to talk about boyfriends; I feel like it's inappropriate.*

Both teachers emphasized several key principles during this activity:

- Reflection: Considering their counterparts' perspectives and critically examining their own assumptions.
- Personal Insight: Identifying what was valuable to them and what they wanted to share.
- Respect: Recognizing the limits of their knowledge about their counterparts and avoiding assumptions. Instead, they were encouraged to express interest and ask thoughtful questions to deepen mutual understanding.

By engaging in this reflective and iterative process, participants learned to approach into a cultural exchange with curiosity and respect, strengthening their communication skills and fostering meaningful connections. During the meeting exchanges, students interacted with at least, three different partners in three rounds. In the first round, some participants found it challenging to express certain ideas or noticed their partners struggling to understand them due to unclear word choices, pronunciation issues, or insufficient explanations of cultural concepts. These initial difficulties became learning opportunities. In subsequent rounds, participants adapted their strategies, either by rephrasing their ideas or by choosing topics that were more engaging and culturally meaningful.

This process enabled participants to improve their communication and cultural exchange skills. While they might have dropped less successful topics after the first round, the topics revisited or introduced in later exchanges were more thoughtfully discussed. For instance, a Mexican student might have initially struggled to explain what they meant in a question about the origin of people living in Canada but later realized they could express the idea in simpler terms and try it with another partner. Similarly, a Canadian student who didn't initially understand a sport mentioned by their Mexican partner could ask for clarification or revisit the topic in a subsequent conversation, where other speakers might present the information more clearly.

But beyond these chances to rephrase messages, in the online meetings participants had the chance to ask questions to clarify topics they were curious about, giving them the freedom to decide what to share and what to keep private. Asking questions to understand what their counterparts had written in the letters was key to engage with their interlocutors' perspective.

Through these exchanges, participants developed a deeper

understanding of cultural nuances and learned how to convey meaning effectively across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The short, focused nature of the interactions allowed them to test their communication strategies, receive immediate feedback, and refine their approach in real time.

This approach to language practice emphasized the value of persistence, adaptability, and cultural awareness. By interacting with multiple partners, students experienced a range of perspectives and communication styles, which enriched their learning and fostered empathy for their partners' experiences as language learners.

The series of activities within the Mexico-Canada e-Tandem program help understand what intercultural competence involves. Each interaction synchronous and asynchronous contributed to various aspects of developing intercultural competence. Participants began with initial feelings of uncertainty about interacting with international counterparts, but through following engagement, they gradually developed cultural sensitivity. This process was not sequential; rather, it involved reflecting on their own culture as well as that of their counterparts, gaining personal insights, and fostering respect. Each exchange played a role in enhancing empathy and intercultural competence, with no single step standing in isolation, but rather supporting a more holistic development. The challenges of both asynchronous and synchronous encounters encouraged participants to reflect on the similarities and differences between themselves and their counterparts. These experiences sparked a range of emotions: at times, participants felt intrigued and eager to learn more, while at other times, they felt discouraged. Through this reflective process, they came to realize that certain aspects of their counterparts' lives, which seemed ordinary to them, were unique or unfamiliar from their own perspective.

This journey fostered the development of communication and negotiation skills. By recognizing and reflecting on both similarities and differences, and gaining deeper insights into their counterparts' experiences, participants identified what they valued within their own culture and enhanced their ability to navigate intercultural communication effectively. This is the meaning we give to cultural sensitivity.

Through this program, it became clear that cultural sensitivity is a necessary step toward developing intercultural competence, as highlighted by Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) and Raluy & Szymańska-Czaplak (2020). Beyond simply recognizing cultural differences, participants gained valuable insights into their own cultural identities. This growing self-awareness played a crucial role in transforming personal insights and served as a tool for negotiating and finding common ground in face-to-face interactions, ultimately fostering respect for others and cultivating empathy. As learners came to understand how their cultural frameworks influenced their perspectives and interactions, they were better equipped to navigate intercultural exchanges with greater understanding.

## Recommendations

The results of this case study suggest that effective e-Tandem begins early in the academic year, focusing on school-related topics and engaging students through structured letter-writing tasks. Writing letters in preparation for each virtual gathering sets a strong foundation for meaningful conversations, helping students establish rapport and contextualize their interactions.

To enrich the learning experience, teachers are encouraged to introduce diverse cultural themes and related vocabulary, including idiomatic expressions and colloquial language. In this study, holiday-related virtual exchanges provided a particularly effective framework for fostering intercultural sensitivity, language development, and empathy. These themes allowed participants to explore cultural similarities and differences in a structured yet engaging manner, while also improving their linguistic competence.

Teachers should ensure a variety of linguistic and cultural materials are available for e-Tandem activities, sharing these resources collaboratively before virtual gatherings. Several challenges emerged in implementing an international e-Tandem program. Differences in school calendars, varying curricular goals between institutions, and students' ongoing commitments to other activities limited the number of virtual meetings. Despite these obstacles, the findings underscore the importance of frequent interactions, as more opportunities to engage with their counterparts resulted in richer cultural exchanges and improved language learning outcomes.

## Conclusions

Throughout the e-Tandem program, students underwent a transformative journey that fostered both personal and intercultural growth. The exchange of letters, a cornerstone of the program, helped participants transition from initial hesitation and nervousness to a state of openness, curiosity, and deeper self-awareness. By reflecting on their own culture and engaging with others in an environment of respect and collaboration, students not only honed their language skills but also developed the confidence to explore diverse strategies for interaction and conversation.

Participants learned to navigate cultural and personal differences by negotiating topics, steering clear of those they preferred to avoid, and organically finding common ground for meaningful discussions. This process encouraged them to think critically about their own cultural identities while gaining insight into the perspectives of their counterparts.

The program's key findings emphasized the value of integrating continuous and diverse cultural exchange activities to sustain engagement and maximize learning outcomes. Handwritten-letters and gifts created tangible connections that transcended geographical and cultural divides, fostering a profound sense of global community and mutual respect. By combining thoughtful preparation with

opportunities for authentic interaction, the e-Tandem program demonstrated the potential for language learning to bridge cultures and cultivate empathy on a deeply personal level.

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