1. Tandem Learning

‘An original way of developing your foreign language skills through contact with another student whose mother tongue is the language you wish to learn and practice. In return you will be expected to help your « tandem partner » learn your own mother tongue’ (VUB, Brussels).

Tandem has probably been taking place informally since language learning began. Formally it was developed largely in continental Europe from the 1960s onwards. Examples include the bringing together of Turkish skilled workers and teachers and social workers in Munich, and the organisation of more than 100 German/French tandem partnerships each year since 1982-3 by the bilingual university of Fribourg (Switzerland) (see Herfurth, 1993, 247-9). More recently Tandem Learning has taken place through the International Tandem Network.

2. Intercultural Learning

As learning in tandem is based upon communication between two members of different language communities and cultures, it also facilitates cultural learning. (Brammerts, 1995, Brammerts, 1996)

3. Tandem Principles

3.1 Autonomy

You are responsible for your own learning. Tandem learners are responsible for identifying their own needs, setting their own goals and finding the means to achieve them.

Each partner should:

- Take responsibility for their own learning
- Identify their own aims
- Decide on their own materials
3.2 Reciprocity

You are responsible for ensuring mutual benefit. Both partners have a responsibility towards each other to help each other learn so that they benefit equally from the exchange.

Each partner should:

- Dedicate the same amount of time to each language
- Invest the same amount of energy in preparation of each language
- Show interest and concern in their partner’s success in speaking and understanding their language

4. Forms or Modes of Tandem Learning

4.1 Face-to-face:

- In bilingual pairs
- In bilingual groups
- In trilingual or multilingual groups

4.2 At a distance:

- Through one-to-one emails
- Through group email, e.g. tandem forums
- Through virtual spaces, e.g. Internet Relay chat (IRC), MOOS, Skype, other virtual learning environments

All forms have in common a learning partnership with the same tandem principles. However, there are advantages and limitations of using the different mode.

5. Advantages and Limitations

5.1 Language exchanges (bilingual or bicultural pairs)

Advantages

- Allow for immediate and focused interaction
- You can use non-verbal communication, you can interrupt or be interrupted at any time, (e.g. for corrections, help or questions) and you can stop the interaction yourself (to ask for input)
- Misunderstandings can be easily dealt with
- Speakers may accommodate their speed to the needs of their partner
Limitations

- Can require a high level of communication skills from partners
- Can be easy to lose focus on goals
- Can be a tendency to rely on the more proficient speaker and/or to code switch (change languages mid-session)
- There is no written record of the session

5.2 Cultural exchange (bilingual or bicultural pairs)

Advantages

- Allow for your specific questions to be addressed
- You choose how long to spend on each topic

Limitations

- You may not always know what you don’t know

5.3 Language exchanges (bilingual or bicultural groups)

Advantages

- As with one-to-one, BUT
- More opportunity for authentic speed of speech between mother tongue speakers
- Broader knowledge base
- There may be less likelihood of assuming your partner is representative of all the languacultural group

5.4 Language exchanges at a distance (bilingual or bicultural pairs)

Advantages

- Emails allows time for responding, annotation of comments, written exchange and written record

Limitations

- Skype or videoconferencing allows for spontaneous interaction, but perhaps not as easy as face-to-face in terms of ‘whole person’ interaction

6. Planning a Tandem Partnership

6.1 Needs Analysis

Firstly, consider these questions and complete the Needs Analysis – Appendix I.

- Why are you interested in undertaking a tandem learning partnership?
• What would you like to be able to do that a tandem partner could help you with?
• What are your priorities?

Secondly, ask yourself what you can offer a tandem partner

6.2 Making your aspirations realistic

Consider your overall aim of wanting to work with a tandem partner, and more specifically, your aims for the first five tandem sessions (one hour in each language). For example:

• I want to be fluent in language X
• I want to be able to present with confidence in language Y
• I want to be able to write a paper like my partner can in language X
• I want to get a paper published in language Y

6.3 Setting Goals

Take your priorities and try turning them into realistic goals, by completing the Goals Setting – Appendix II and consider the following questions.

• How do you think you will achieve your goals?
• How might your goals change if your partner is at a distance?
• How might your goals change if you find out that your partner knows more (or less) about something than you thought s/he would?

6.4 Considerations

Autonomy

You prepare your tandem and your partner prepares theirs. For example, if you want your partner to read a paper you have written or search for articles in Chinese/English/French etc., then they will do this in their one hour dedicated to your tandem time. YOU can undertake corrections of your own written work or undertake further searches in your own time OR you can agree to lengthen the tandem partnership

Reciprocity

You seek to ensure your partner gets maximum benefit. Share the time equally.

7. Expectations

7.1 What a Tandem Partnership can do for you

• Develop your awareness of your language learning strategies
• Develop your confidence in communicating real-time with mother tongue speakers
• Identify your needs with regards to your goals
• Enhance your cultural awareness
7.2 What a Tandem Partnership can’t do for you

- Make you perfect
- Give you answers to all your questions
- Give you feedback in the way a language teacher is trained to do. For example, your partner is an expert in using the language but not necessarily an expert in explaining the way the language works

7.3 Misconceptions

- Your partner will know what you need
- Your partner will know the right answers to your questions
- Your partner is an expert in knowing how their language/culture works
- How your partner speaks/what your partner thinks is how all speakers of your partner’s language will speak/think

8. Sustaining a Tandem Partnership

Some Suggestions for Successful Language Learning in Tandem

- Find a learning style that suits you
- Plan other activities around the tandem session
- Try to figure out how the language works
- Take as much as you can from your partner’s speech, she/he is an expert
- Don’t worry about mistakes, aim for fluency first, then accuracy
- If all else fails, guess, and learn to live with uncertainty
- Think in the language
- Laugh at your mistakes
- Put yourself in your partner’s place and help her/him to build up confidence

Some Suggestions for Successful Culture Learning in Tandem

- Try to figure out the relationship between keywords in the language and culture (including history, everyday usage, common associations)
- Compare usage of similar keywords in both languages you are familiar with, for example, the term professor and its linguistic equivalent in another language may mean something very different in practice
- Identify similarities and differences between your ‘home’ and ‘target’ culture
- Consider variations within language-speaking countries/areas, for example in Spain, Latin America, Asturias and Catalunña
- Remember culture changes just as language does and people do
• A culturally-aware person needs more than knowledge (open-mindedness, tolerance of ambiguity, curiosity)

Some General Suggestions for Successful Tandem Learning

• Be explicit: explain to your partner what you want to achieve and how they might help you, for example, agree strategies for correction, how you will work with differing levels of knowledge in some areas
• Ask for help when you need it
• Make suggestions to your partner for how they might effectively achieve their goals
• Try out different learning strategies and discuss their effectiveness with your partner
• Be creative
• Remember, tandem is the one language learning situation you can comfortably expect your partner to want to help you
Appendix I

Tandem Learning Partnerships: Needs Analysis

Think about your overall interest.reason for undertaking tandem learning. Then try and narrow down your requirements to specific circumstances: e.g. talking to friends, giving formal presentations; understanding media; note taking, lab reports, preparing papers, attending conferences.

Decide which aspects of the foreign language you need to develop: extending specialist vocabulary, grammar, cultural knowledge.

What is your present level?

Write the number which you think describes your standard in the following areas. Identify other areas of importance to you.

5 = Good. This is the level I am aiming for.

1 = Very Basic. A long way from the standard I’m aiming for.

Not sure? Assume 1 or 2 for the moment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language/cultural /academic knowledge skills</th>
<th>Present level (1/5)</th>
<th>Prioritise your choices (* the first 4-5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Range of vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy /Sentence structures e.g. word order/construction of sentences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation/ Intonation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Listening Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>General academic writing skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic cultures – studying/working in ......country</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading research in the language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparing conference papers in ....language /... country</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying databases /Accessing library sources</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix II

**Tandem Learning Partnerships: Goals Setting**

**Set your goals**

Now you have identified your priorities, what do you hope to achieve by the end of the agreed number of tandem sessions? Be as realistic as possible and give yourself manageable and measurable goals. These goals are your responsibility to achieve; your partner can help you with them, so discuss them with him/her.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I want to be able to do after ........ sessions</th>
<th>What means am I going to use?</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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