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Modern Languages, Modern Learning:
Tandem Language Programs In K-12 Education

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching a second language is, and has always been, about relationships. In order to contextualize language learning and build relationships inside and outside the classroom, having students converse with other learners around the world in real-time is, at the very least, worthy of consideration. One promising outlet to foster this global communication and internationalization of learning is Tandem language learning. Authors María Vassallo and João A. Telles share the following definition: “Foreign language learning in-tandem involves pairs of (native or competent) speakers whose aim is to learn each other’s language by means of bilingual conversation sessions” (83). The following sections will discuss research on the benefits and drawbacks of implementing intercultural exchange by means of Tandem language learning programs in K-12 Schools. The type of Tandem referenced in this paper and most easily implemented in schools would likely be related to what Vassallo and Telles refer to as *Teletandem*, or “online Tandem that uses reading, writing, audio and video-conference tools” also known as *eTandem Language Learning (eTLL)* (84). The focus of this research is to evaluate the appeal, effectiveness, utility, and reliability of these programs in the context of today’s classrooms.

L2 EDUCATION POST-PANDEMIC

Second language (L2) instructors have always valued face-to-face communication. After all, it is no secret that gestures, body language, and facial expressions play a large role in how we interpret language. That being said, the positive momentum gained in merging the world of education with the world of technology during the global COVID-19 pandemic should not be

ignored. The expansion of educators' ideas of learning and of the physical classroom to include learners both synchronously and asynchronously brought a challenge that came with a silver lining. The technology in the 21st century classroom is more advanced than ever and teachers are more equipped than ever with the tools and knowledge to take on such advanced technology. The question remains, although the ability to communicate from a single classroom to classrooms around the world is so readily available; should this technology be used in the K-12 classroom environment? Should more technologically driven forms of communication be used in education post-COVID or should face-to-face instruction be favored?

It is important to note that the implementation of Tandem Language Learning programs should not replace traditional classroom instruction. World language teachers still play the critical role of facilitators of communication and providers of language support. Tandem is meant to be a tool to increase global perspective and communication, but that is only a portion of the standards that world language teachers must address. According to the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, there are five key goal areas to learning languages: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. These are also known as the five C's of world language teaching. The five C's heavily emphasize cultural competence, diverse perspectives, and critical thinking/critical reflection. All of these can be gained in the process of participating in Tandem Language programs; however, it is necessary to guide students through this process, especially since many K-12 students in the United States may have never interacted with someone from another country before outside of taking a family vacation.

Learning a second language is a social endeavor that requires much more complex interaction than using only teacher-to-student input allows for. One author views Tandem as an

“implementation of learner autonomy” (Schwienhorst 427). Learner autonomy is characterized by a student’s ability to make decisions regarding aspects of what and how they learn. Schwienhorst argues that a valuable relationship exists between pedagogy and technology that has the capability of shaping individual learners both cognitively and socially. The social component in Tandem learning comes into play when students are able to have natural conversations with their language partners about topics of interest to both parties. These conversations can have a general guide or outline of what conversations should look like, or, for more advanced language students, Tandem can provide an opportunity to just authentically converse. Providing full learner autonomy in the classroom would be the latter. Technology also provides opportunities for cognitive growth in Tandem learning situations. When students are conversing with a language partner in real-time via video-conference tools, they are pushed to extract meaning from the audio and conjugate verbs with limited time and supports. Utilizing circumlocution, trying to explain an unknown vocabulary term to their partner without deviating from the target language, is another cognitive skill gained in the process. For these reasons, *Teletandem* can be more challenging than any fill-in-the-blank worksheet one might see in a traditional L2 classroom.

Technology can be an incredibly efficient and useful tool, as long as it is used effectively in the classroom. As noted above, with Tandem learning, technology can facilitate the acquisition of social skills, cues, and nuances with synchronous communication. Asynchronous learning is not without value; however, learning a language requires very active exchange between teacher and student, as well as between a student and their peers (those inside the classroom and online). Asynchronous learning can be incredibly helpful when practicing the more finite details of language including grammatical structures and vocabulary terms.

HISTORY OF TANDEM

Thus far, Tandem exists mainly in a higher education setting. Independent learners, undergraduate students, and graduate students in Colombia, Germany, China, France, Brazil, and New Zealand have found varying levels of success in the past with intercultural language exchange programs. Implementing Tandem into K-12 schools via eTLL or Teletandem programs presents an added challenge since these students are usually receiving a free, public education. University students often have the privilege to participate in these programs out of personal interest; they register and pay for their selected courses. Additionally, students in K-12 courses are age 18 or younger; therefore, privacy and security through language exchange platforms remains a concern for administration, parents, and educators. Programs that can ensure security are often those that require both Tandem parties to pay a substantial cost. This payment would demonstrate a commitment to serious language practice and a desire to use the platform for its intended use.

Taking a look at the very beginning of Tandem programs, credit is owed to Jürgen Wolff, who sought to increase language partnerships between the Spanish and German. His actions led to the organization of the official TANDEM® Network in the year 1983 (Cziko 27). For the remainder of the twentieth century, Tandem maintained its status as a face-to-face language exchange program centered mainly in a handful of European countries and surrounding regions. At the turn of the century, Tandem expanded once again to include a total of 23 member schools that functioned both independently and as a part of a collaborative project. As mentioned on their website, the philosophy of the TANDEM International Language Schools Group is “different countries, different languages and realities are in close contact and pursue a common goal: to

motivate people to learn foreign languages and to embrace new cultures” (Tandem International Sprachschulen). This network maintains its success today and is still offering opportunities for students around the world to travel and expand their knowledge of language and culture. For many, Tandem presents an opportunity to study abroad and fully immerse oneself, but for others, it is limiting for financial and other reasons. For students who desire an immersive cultural experience while staying close to home, the expansion of Tandem learning to an online platform was a huge step in the right direction. That being said, it was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that progress for Tandem via the internet was seen. As author Gary Cziko mentions:

“the Internet was first employed for Tandem, initially in the form of an English-German online discussion group created by Helmut Brammerts who, in 1994, founded the International Email Tandem Network in which 11 European universities originally participated. This network became the International eTandem Network in 1996.”

With the development of eTandem, online learners could collaborate with students from other countries whom they would otherwise never have the ability to communicate with due to distance. Furthermore, as time has gone on, this platform has only become more accessible and more beneficial to the language learning needs of students. The most important distinction to note between the eTandem of the early twenty-first century and the eTandem present in society today is the methodology and format. An important switch occurred from writing emails, instant messaging (IM'ing), and participating in chat rooms to more active forms of communication like video chatting (El-Hariri 24). An important system that favored this new methodology was known as the Electronic Network for Language and Culture Exchange or ENLACE. Author Gary Cziko designed ENLACE to operate as a platform for “worldwide synchronous eTandem learning” (Cziko 28). The two words “worldwide” and “synchronous” hold a lot of weight because throughout the history of Tandem, it has been criticized for not being inclusive enough

due to those criteria. When Tandem first gained traction in the 90s and early 2000s, it was easy to see that in many cases “courses remain inside Europe or occidental circles” (Wang et al. 396). The globalization of eTandem networks like ENLACE and others was the critical next step in providing any student in the world an opportunity to connect with someone of a different culture, not just someone from a European cultural background. German, French, and Spanish are often the only “world languages” available in traditional classrooms in the United States to this day. However, what message does this send students interested in languages prominent in Asia, Africa, or the Middle East? The following section will discuss why international communication is so beneficial for students and how the absence of a global education has made an impact thus far.

INTERNATIONALIZATION OF EDUCATION

In the year 2014, less than .03% of the Colombian population participated in learning German as a second language (El-Hariri 23). For context, that is around 13,000 out of 47 million people in Colombia. This statistic is significant because it shows how students in today’s society are limited by the inaccessibility of language learning services, preconceived notions or stereotypes of foreign languages and cultures, geographic borders, and language learning stigmas. Ignorance of other cultures and an inability to see the world from other people’s perspectives is the result of generations of history only being taught from one side. Teaching a Eurocentric view of history can be incredibly damaging because the rich cultural and linguistic history outside of western civilization is being ignored or deemed unimportant. It may not be possible to teach the history and practices of every single global civilization; however, language

courses offer the unique opportunity to explore diverse cultural perspectives as a part of the curriculum, something that should be encouraged as much as possible in all subjects.

Internationalization or global learning should not be the goal, but rather the standard for education in the 21st century. Teaching a diverse group of students a narrow-minded curriculum simply does not fit the bill. Andrea Dlaska from the University of Surrey in the UK writes, “language programs employ student-centered forms of learning in response to the heterogeneity of their student body” (260). In higher education, especially at liberal arts universities, diverse perspectives can be seen throughout the curriculum of almost any course, why is this not always the case in K-12 education? Moreover, students in middle schools and high schools that are wishing to see more of their own heritage and identity represented should be able to look to their instructors and the content in their courses to feel validated and uplifted. This is essentially what Richards, Brown, and Forde refer to as “culturally responsive pedagogy” or “culturally responsive instruction.” Some strategies that are key to increase cultural responsiveness that these authors mention include “acknowledging student differences and commonalities,” “educating students about the diversity of the world around them,” and “promoting equity and mutual respect among students” (66). Being able to relate to and respect those who have different backgrounds, cultures, and possibly even speak different languages should be a big part of education in a student’s formative years. Richards et al. mention that in order to educate students about diversity, “Teachers need to provide students with learning opportunities (e.g., have students interview individuals from other cultures; link students to email pals from other communities and cultures)” (66). Opportunities for students to connect with peers from other cultures is exactly what eTandem and Teletandem programs provide.

Not only do language exchange programs like Tandem provide an opportunity for students to get to know other cultural perspectives, but they also assist in breaking down biases and stereotypes that a student believes about people from a particular background. The United States has had a history of education rooted in patriotism. Demonstrating respect and admiration for one's own nation without recognizing and celebrating its inherent diversity is to cultivate ignorance and toxic superiority. A study of language exchange conducted between Portuguese and French students participating in Teletandem Brazil found that "only those who face their own cultural identity without any feeling of superiority or inferiority are able to maintain successful linguistic and cultural exchanges" (Santos 819). Facilitating Tandem programs online for K-12 students would teach these critical ideas of cooperation, reciprocity, mutual respect, and curiosity that students need to carry with them into adulthood.

PITFALLS VERSUS PRAISE

Although the majority of the research regarding Tandem, eTandem, and other telecollaboration platforms discusses its positive results, implementing a program that is elaborate and immersive does come with certain difficulties. Authors Wang, Berger, and Szilas created a comprehensive list of ten reasons why Tandem projects could fail categorized by "individual factors, classroom-level factors, socio-institutional factors to interactional factors" (397). This list is as follows:

- “1. Lack of Intercultural Communicative Competency (ICC)
2. Low learner motivation and divergent expectations
3. Teacher-teacher relationship
4. Loose task design

5. Learner-matching (randomization leads to mismatch)
6. Local group dynamics
7. Pre-exchange briefing
8. Technology (lack of access/unstable internet connection)
9. General organization of course of study
10. Prestige values (stereotypes, resentment, inferiority/superiority)” (397).

Along with the levels on which these failures occur, it is clear to see that difficulties lie in four major realms: communication, organization, structure, and cultural perception. To address the “cultural dissonance” and technical issues presented in the list above, the authors also provide potential design solutions. In summary, the revised course design included specific instructions, careful selection, increased coordination, scaffolded sessions, and pre-exchange training. These adjustments cannot account for all errors that may occur along the way but provide a good guide to avoid unnecessary disconnect among language exchange partners.

Despite these valid pitfalls, there are also plenty of praises in the history and implementation of eTandem programs to celebrate. The most prevalent advantages to utilizing language exchange in L2 classes are student enjoyment, decreased foreign language related anxiety, and increased language skills like writing, comprehension, and language production. All in all, this type of communicative activity provides foreign language students with an exciting change of pace from traditional classroom or textbook learning.

First, it should be a priority that students enjoy what they are learning. There are plenty of stressors for adolescents as is, learning a language should not be one of them. L2 education should mimic the actual use of second languages. Rather than create an environment of stress that puts students under pressure to perform, language courses should be communicative and engaging. This is where Tandem comes in. Authors Resnik and Schallmoser investigated the

relationship between eTandem program participation and Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE). Their findings show that over half the participants reported “feeling at ease when speaking with their Tandem partners” and that participating in language exchange “made them enjoy the language more” (Resnik and Schallmoser 552). Similarly, 16 of the 19 students who took part in this study relayed to interviewers that they “felt the Tandem scheme had a positive effect on their own FLE” (550). Additional benefits mentioned in this study include but are not limited to self-perceived improvement in pronunciation and oral communication, developing friendships, gaining deeper cultural understanding, and a perception of authenticity of communication.

It cannot be proven that participating in eTandem causes students to have less anxiety surrounding their acquisition of a foreign language; however, we see that a strong correlation exists due to a few related factors. One of these factors is that corrective feedback feels less anxiety inducing when coming from a peer language partner rather than a teacher (El-Hariri 31). That being said, students are able to correct mistakes in pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary that would have put them on the spot and caused stress in a larger classroom context. Some adjectives to describe eTandem used by participants in the study of Colombian learners of German include “open, relaxing, and low pressure” (32). The author does state that although their confidence is raised and anxiety is lowered in this context, it does not guarantee that these positive emotions will carry over once traditional instruction is resumed.

Even though transfer of the positive social emotional impacts of Tandem programs is not certain, the increase in exposure to authentic conversation is a great opportunity for K-12 students to gain language skills that they can utilize even once their Tandem partnership is over. For example, a study of the writing skills of New Zealand students of Spanish and Colombian students of English found that “both groups wrote significantly more correct and more

syntactically complex paragraphs” after an eight week online Tandem intervention in which their partners were able to comment on and correct their language expression (Tolosa et al.). In many instances, students were even able to explain explicit grammatical rules and structures that their language partners helped them to understand. Among the topics mentioned were the importance of punctuation, word order, the use of personal pronouns, and accent placement (Tolosa et al.). The reason that these rules stuck with students after Tandem language interactions is not always clear but can be greatly attributed to the fact that students are discussing topics of interest, discovering shared interests with their partner, and forming authentic connections. Students want to be able to clearly express their thoughts and interests in the language they are learning. When they are able to do so in conversation with a partner who provides a new cultural perspective, the whole experience is all the more fulfilling.

CONCLUSION

With the appropriate planning, scaffolding, and cultural mediation, eTandem programs can be successful for any population of students. With the amount of research surrounding their efficacy in promoting cultural competence, increasing knowledge of linguistic structures, and improving student confidence in oral communication, the benefits of implementing Tandem are huge. A factor to continue to consider would be whether teachers from participating countries could effectively collaborate to provide their students with a well-organized language exchange and a well-matched set of learning goals that their students are able to complete through partner conversation. Administrators and instructors will also have to consider whether the program in use balances learner autonomy with the security of their student population. In addition, it may not be plausible for all schools to participate in eTandem programs due to a lack of internet accessibility or financial resources. However, for those who are willing to grapple with these

obstacles, eTandem learning presents an exciting new frontier for the future of second language education in K-12 schools. It is almost impossible for students to be prepared to live, work, and travel in a diverse world without being educated in diverse perspectives. Students need opportunities to communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds as soon as possible in an educational setting because it can drastically shape the way they view the world and the people around them. Implementing eTandem programs in K-12 schools is a step in the right direction to provide students an outlet to the real world.

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