

## Challenges in Tandem Language Learning

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### Abstract

*This study explores the challenges and dynamics of tandem language learning, where two individuals from different linguistic backgrounds collaborate to improve their language skills. Through a questionnaire and analysis of reflection papers, the research investigates three key areas: organizational aspects, language proficiency, and personal interaction. Findings reveal that while scheduling conflicts and time zone differences are common, most participants manage to maintain regular contact through flexible and digital communication tools. Language barriers were primarily addressed through clarification and paraphrasing, with cultural misunderstandings occurring less frequently. The study also highlights the importance of motivation and balanced engagement, noting that unequal commitment between partners can impact the experience. Despite these challenges, participants reported high satisfaction, demonstrating that tandem learning is an effective method for fostering linguistic and cultural exchange. The research suggests strategies to improve engagement for future programs.*

**Keywords:** *Tandem language learning; autonomous learning; learning challenges.*

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## 1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, the ability to communicate across languages is not only a valuable skill but often a necessity. Tandem language learning, a method in which two individuals with different native languages collaborate to learn each other's language, has gained prominence as an interactive and learner-centered approach. Unlike language learning in traditional classroom settings, tandem learning offers students the opportunity to engage in authentic communication, fostering both linguistic and cultural exchange. Since the learners can choose topics and decide individually which areas of language they want to improve, this approach offers benefits that regular language classes cannot.

Despite its benefits, this learning method presents unique challenges that can influence its overall effectiveness. These challenges stem from various factors, such as differing levels of linguistic proficiency, unequal commitment or motivation between partners, and the complexities of providing constructive feedback in a foreign language. Furthermore, sociocultural dynamics and the absence of structured guidance often influence the learning outcomes.

Previous studies have examined challenges and issues related to tandem language learning from the perspective of the organizer (Helm, 2015) or with regard to tandems as part of a formal educational context, i.e., classroom tandems (Elo & Pörn, 2021). This paper seeks to explore the key challenges faced by learners in tandem language learning and their impact on the efficacy of the process.

## **2. Data and method**

To investigate the challenges faced in tandem language learning, a questionnaire was designed as the primary data collection tool. The questionnaire consisted of three sections, each addressing a specific category of potential challenges:

1. **Organizational Aspects** – This section addressed challenges related to scheduling, balancing responsibilities, and maintaining consistent participation.
2. **Language Aspects** – Questions in this category examined issues related to linguistic proficiency, error correction, and language practice.
3. **Personal Interaction** – Questions focused on interpersonal dynamics, including cultural differences, levels of engagement, and mutual support within partnerships.

The questions were based on assumed and previously reported challenges. Participants completed the questionnaire anonymously to encourage honest and reflective responses.

This questionnaire study involved 25 participants, comprising 16 females and 9 males, who engaged in tandem language learning partnerships in the current or previous semesters. The participants were university students from the Ruhr-Universität Bochum in Germany and the Virginia Tech in the U.S. On the German side, the group included both native German speakers and international students with various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, fostering a diversity of perspectives and experiences. The U.S. participants were native English speakers learning German, with no international students included in this group. The participants in this study were drawn from two distinct tandem learning settings. The first group consisted of students enrolled in a regular tandem program, which runs over the course of an entire semester. This program is open to any language combination, provided that suitable matches between participants can be found. In this setting, participants are responsible for managing their own

schedules as well as choosing when and where to meet their partners and which material to work with. The second group consisted of students who participated in a group tandem program held on campus. This program provided a more structured environment, as sessions were held at predetermined times and locations, and material was made available upon request.

In addition, 30 reflection papers from previous participants were evaluated and compared to the results from the survey.

### **3. Findings and discussion**

In this section, we analyze the findings of our study, focusing on three key areas of investigation: challenges in organizational aspects, language aspects, and personal interaction. Each section had 9 to 11 questions.

#### **3.1. Organizational challenges**

Among the various challenges identified in tandem learning, organizational issues often prove to be more complex than expected and may impact the structure, coordination and overall success of collaborative efforts.

##### *3.1.1. Differences in academic calendars, program timeframes, and local time*

A major challenge is the different academic calendars followed in both countries. Whereas German semesters run from October through February and April through July, the U.S. system has a fall semester from late August to December and spring semester from January to mid-May. The tandem program requires at least 13 weeks, which is likely to result in one participant having to meet during a semester or holiday break. The semester breaks posed a particular problem because many students (at the German university) work a lot during that time while also writing exams.

More than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the respondents indicated that time challenges were the major reason for difficulty in scheduling meetings. Finding a meeting time was more difficult than expected for slightly more than half of the respondents. U.S. students reported difficulties in planning meetings especially during holiday breaks but also during the semester given academic workloads. This was confirmed by German students who worked with partners abroad. The timeframe of early morning in the U.S. and mid-afternoon in Germany seemed to be the best solution. One American student reported missing meetings because of miscalculations due to the switch to and from daylight savings time, which occurs on different days in Germany and the U.S.

Even within the structured framework of the group tandem, participants encountered difficulties with meeting times; a recurring issue was partners failing to arrive on time for meetings, which was unexpected given the program's clearly defined schedule and timeframe.

However, the majority of respondents indicated that they encountered no or minimal challenges in establishing regular meeting times. Consequently, the challenges posed by time constraints did not prove to be significant enough to interfere with the regularity of meetings. In general, the significant portion of participants found it relatively easy to stay connected, even though most respondents experienced occasional challenges in remaining in contact. The majority of respondents, 11 out of 24 (about 46%), reported that there were periods of time during the program when it was sometimes difficult to remain in contact with their tandem partner. A smaller group, 5 respondents (around 21%), found it seldom difficult, while an equal number, 5 respondents (also 21%), said they never had difficulty staying in touch. Only 3 respondents (12%) indicated that it was very often hard to maintain communication.

Some students continued to meet with their tandem partner after the program had officially concluded. However, time constraints ultimately led to an end to the meetings. This suggests that the clear structure of the program, with an official start and end, plays a crucial role in helping participants navigate time management challenges effectively.

### *3.1.2. Logistics*

For the majority of participants (76%) it was not a problem to agree on a meeting format. For pairs consisting of an American and a German student, the format was largely predetermined, as they had to rely on video conferencing tools such as Zoom to conduct their sessions. Some participants from the German university who could have met in person chose to hold their tandem sessions via video conferencing tools as well. Their differing class schedules made it easier to meet in the evening online, avoiding the need for additional travel.

Technological advances have made online tandems much easier to initiate. There are now a variety of online exchange opportunities, including Microsoft Teams, Skype, WhatsApp Video, and Zoom. This made the challenge of selecting an appropriate format for online tandem sessions obsolete. The most common online meeting formats were Zoom and WhatsApp with 11 of 23 respondents (48%) identifying the former and 9 (39%) the latter. The American students preferred Zoom 4:1, whereas the German students were almost evenly divided between the two platforms (7:8). A 2020 survey corroborates the preference for Zoom (Di Gennaro & Ojeda, 2021, p. 16). However, although WhatsApp has traditionally been associated with text messaging, recent developments have made it popular for audio/video calls as well, and it is perceived as providing a more casual video calling experience than Zoom, which offers a more structured environment geared toward professional interactions. As O'Dowd (2021, p. 220) notes, students also have begun using communication tools in tandem programs that they use

regularly in their everyday lives; this would also explain the shift to WhatsApp. It is unclear what functions on WhatsApp students in this study used.

American students reported more technical difficulties than the German students, although only one of the 21 respondents indicated that difficulties occurred very often. A majority of the German students (75%) indicated that they never encountered technology issues; however, this may include students who met at least occasionally in person. Nonetheless, such concerns did not appear to have any negative impact on the tandem experience for either group of students.

Out of the 15 participants who met face-to-face, 4 were part of the group tandem that provided designated rooms. However, two participants still reported difficulties in finding an ideal meeting place due to the main room being very noisy and the limited availability of smaller rooms, which prevented each group from having its own space. One participant reported that even working in a room with only one other tandem pair was distracting, especially during challenging phases. The availability of quiet workspaces was also mentioned as an issue by one student from the regular program who worked on campus. However, it appeared that this issue was not as significant as initially anticipated. Nevertheless, making students aware of ideal working environments and encouraging them to avoid noisy places, such as cafés, could help them work more efficiently from the outset.

Interestingly, 10 out of 25 participants (40%) reported that finding suitable materials was never difficult. This contrasts with the fact that it was a common complaint raised during the reflection sessions and frequently mentioned in the final reflection papers. Of those who encountered difficulties, 8 participants (32%) indicated that it was very often difficult, and 7 (28%) stated that it was sometimes challenging. This issue persisted even in the group tandem, despite the possibility of asking for materials or receiving suggestions on how to proceed if necessary.

### **3.2. Language challenges**

#### *3.2.1. Linguistic Proficiency and Educational Background and Misunderstandings*

The prerequisite for participation in the tandem program is at least B1 level of proficiency in the target language and C1 in the primary language. Neither the American nor the German students were tested to confirm linguistic proficiency; students self-identified their level as part of the application process.

As foreign language learning, especially at the university level, continues to plummet in the United States (Quinn, 2023), it seems likely that the linguistic gulf between American and German students will continue to increase. Although many U.S. students who study a language in college began learning it in secondary (and occasionally grade) school, the experience cannot be compared to the 8 years of English typical of the curriculum of a German secondary school student who attends the university. To this may be added the likelihood of German students

having visited an English-speaking country, whereas American students often have not traveled to a German-speaking country, or if so, only for a very short period of time.

While 32% of participants reported experiencing communication problems often or very often due to differences in language abilities, a larger proportion (44%) indicated that they needed to ask for clarification often or sometimes during their sessions. This suggests that outright communication barriers due to language skills were less frequent, but misunderstandings requiring clarification were more common. Among those who had communication problems, 12 participants attributed the need for clarification to their own lack of language abilities, while 6 participants pointed to their partner's linguistic abilities as the reason. This tendency to attribute misunderstandings to their own language abilities rather than those of their partner could also reflect a sense of modesty or self-criticism among participants, as they might hesitate to place responsibility on their partner.

Except for one pair, participants found effective ways to navigate communication difficulties by using translation tools, paraphrasing, or simplifying their language. However, one pair struggled significantly because one partner was uncooperative and had to be repeatedly asked to slow down and allow the other person time to write down new words and sentences. Since this occurred during the group tandem, it was easy for the foreign language teachers, who also served as tandem organizers, to intervene and address the situation by providing immediate assistance and suggestions. For the regular tandem, coaching and general availability of the organizers can help overcome such problems before the struggling participants decide to quit.

Students were generally able to resolve communication challenges through a variety of methods. English was used as an intermediate language by some pairs, whereas others defaulted to the language they determined as the easier one and paraphrased their ideas. Not surprisingly, online translation tools such as DeepL and Google Translator were employed as well. Students noted the importance of having time to write down new words and sentences.

### *3.2.2. Cultural Dynamics*

Challenges in communication seemed to result primarily from linguistic issues. Misunderstandings on account of cultural differences occurred very often or sometimes only 17% of the time. Although the tandem experience is ostensibly focused on language skills, the students commented frequently on how interesting it was to learn about another culture and how much fun they had talking about cultural differences.

## **3.3. Challenges in personal interaction**

### *3.3.1. Power Dynamics and Role Negotiation*

Tandem learning, by its nature, involves a partnership where learner autonomy develops interactively. According to Little (2001, pp. 31–32), “accepting responsibility for one’s own

learning necessarily entails accepting responsibility also for the learning of one's partner". However, the traditional pedagogy model, where the teacher holds the initiative, might lead participants to believe that the native speaker should dominate in their language (Little, 2001). This dynamic may exacerbate the asymmetry between the less and more proficient speakers (Vassallo & Telles, 2006), but this has only been mentioned by one person whose partner had significantly stronger language skills, creating a pronounced imbalance in their linguistic competencies. In general, participants seemed to negotiate a balanced conversation with their partner during tandem meetings, with the majority (79%) indicating that they seldom or never encountered difficulties because one partner monopolized the conversation, and they did not have an adequate opportunity to speak.

Difficulties resulting from personal differences were seldom or never an issue 88% of the time. Only one participant reported that a partner had asked an inappropriate or awkward question during a tandem conversation.

### *3.3.2. Motivation and Engagement*

Motivation and engagement among respondents were notably high, as all students had voluntarily applied to participate in the tandem program, demonstrating their genuine interest in the opportunity. While students could earn credit for the experience by completing additional assignments, the majority of German participants joined primarily to improve their language skills rather than to fulfill academic requirements. Out of 25 respondents, 24 indicated that they were either very motivated or motivated to meet regularly with their tandem partner. However, only 18 of these felt that both they and their partner were equally engaged in the partnership. Usually initial enthusiasm is high, but motivation sometimes declines over time due to additional responsibilities or challenges in managing the partnership. The need for partners to take responsibility for their own learning—and, by extension, their partner's learning—can make sustaining motivation more difficult. It is interesting that even though the majority felt that they were not equally motivated, this did not seem to stem from preparation. 76% of respondents reported no difficulties due to inadequate preparation by their partner. The remaining 24% attributed the lack of preparation to their partner rather than themselves. Notably, none of the American students reported difficulties stemming from their partner's lack of preparation.

During the program orientation, the importance of identifying tandem learning objectives was emphasized. Nonetheless, 16% of respondents (4 of 25) admitted they had no specific learning objectives. Among those who did, 86% claimed to have achieved their goals. The most challenging areas for improvement were speaking fluently (for both German and American students), vocabulary (for German students), and producing spontaneous responses. Pronunciation was identified as a concern only by German participants.

### *3.3.3. Feedback and Interaction*

Providing and accepting feedback was generally simple for participants. 84% of respondents reported that it was very easy or easy to provide constructive feedback to their partner. The German participants were evenly divided on grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary as the most difficult areas to correct (28-32% each), while American participants focused almost exclusively on grammar (80%) and pronunciation (20%). This discrepancy may stem from the lack of emphasis on grammar explanations in U.S. English classes.

All respondents indicated that it was either very easy or easy to accept constructive feedback from their partners. This suggests a high level of comfort between partners and the development of effective feedback strategies. Despite differences in age, personal backgrounds, academic experiences, and expectations, participants negotiated these factors effectively to achieve their tandem program goals. The importance of providing and receiving feedback was stressed in the tandem orientation which may have led to few problems in this area as students were aware of it beforehand.

## **4. Conclusion**

The initial aim of this study was the assumption that there are several challenges that hinder effective learning. However, the findings indicated that while these challenges are indeed present, they are not as substantial as originally presumed, and participants appear to be generally capable of identifying solutions. This study has highlighted several key challenges within the tandem learning process, including organizational issues, language proficiency discrepancies, and personal dynamics between partners. Although logistical challenges such as differing academic calendars and time zones were common, the majority of participants were able to navigate these with flexibility and technology. Linguistically, communication barriers were most often resolved through clarification, paraphrasing, and translation tools, with participants demonstrating adaptability in overcoming these difficulties.

Cultural differences, while present, did not significantly hinder communication, and students enjoyed learning about each other's cultures. The power dynamics and motivation levels between partners showed variation, with some instances of imbalanced engagement. However, the overall high motivation to improve language skills and the ability to provide and receive constructive feedback contributed to a positive tandem experience. Despite the occasional challenges, the study demonstrates that tandem learning remains an effective method for language acquisition, offering valuable opportunities for personal growth and intercultural communication. The set structure of the program, which begins with an introduction and orientation for all participants may play a crucial role in helping participants overcome challenges. Future research could compare less structured tandems to assess the impact of guidance.



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