

Building Virtual Bridges: Developing an international tandem link between an Austrian and an Irish university

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This paper outlines the development of an e-tandem initiative between universities in Austria and Ireland and discusses its relevance to the Swiss context. Students in the two institutions study *Business English* and *German for International Business* respectively. As a core component of these modules, they exchange application materials and provide each other with feedback in a virtual environment.

Key Words: English Language Teaching, e-Tandem learning, language teaching and learning, language for international business, language for specific purposes, intercultural competence, cultural difference

Tandem learning and connecting students:

Tandem learning has been popular in the field of English language teaching and further afield for several decades (Renner, 2016). In practice, it involves groups or pairs of learners communicating with one another for the purpose of learning each other's languages and cultures, or in the words of Coutinho (2016, pp. 604):

Telecollaboration or Tandem learning is an internet-based intercultural exchange between groups of learners of different cultural and national backgrounds set up in an institutional blended learning context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

Many studies report its motivational impact resulting for example from the authentic nature of the contact and sharing of meaning between learners (Cole and el Silencio, 2013; O'Rourke, 2005).

Barriers to the integration of elements of tandem learning into language courses tend to be associated with the logistical difficulties of designing and monitoring a tandem initiative (see for example Vassallo and Telles, 2006). Ongoing developments in the field of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are helping to overcome such challenges, however, and supporting the development of "e-tandem" initiatives. These are those initiatives that occur in a virtual space without actual face-to-face contact on the part of the learners. The

technological possibilities afforded by e-tandem learning, and in particular the use of synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication, make it a highly versatile pedagogical tool. This is demonstrated by the fact that it has been used with diverse groups of learners and languages and in different contexts, for example, with French-speaking ESL and English-speaking FSL secondary school students in Canada (Priego 2011), German college students in the United States and English high school students in Germany (Schenker 2013), or more recently in the form of Tandem MOOC (2016) developed to connect learners of English and Spanish in a virtual learning environment.

This paper provides an example of a specific e-tandem initiative currently being developed between students enrolled on a module, *Business English*, at a university in Austria and their counter-parts, primarily native speakers of English enrolled on a module, *German for International Business*, at a university in Ireland. A similar approach could be replicated between students in a variety of domains and locations, in particular where cross-linguistic and cross-cultural exchange is of relevance to their studies. This particular tandem relationship was initiated on a pilot basis in the academic year 2014-15 and repeated based on learning from the pilot during the academic year 2016-17.

A tandem initiative in practice:

The students selected for the tandem were all enrolled on the two modules mentioned in the previous section, that is Business English in Austria and German for International Business in Ireland. The focus in these modules is on both language for business and business-related content. As such they operate at the interface between language learning and the field known as Content and Language Integrated Learning (or CLIL) (for further discussion and examples, see Bruen and Wagner, 2008).

Core, assessed elements of both modules include preparation for the process of applying for jobs, that is sourcing and understanding job advertisements, composing a Curriculum Vitae and cover letter as part of a job application and preparation for job interviews. The authors of this paper are the module coordinators in each case and have, over a number of years, noted difficulties associated with motivating students to engage in these important tasks. The setting up of the e-tandem was therefore intended to make the study of this element of their program more obviously authentic and engaging for these groups of students. It was also intended to aid the acquisition of relevant language and culture-specific knowledge. The

process of setting up the tandem link began with the establishment of a pilot project in September, 2014.

Pilot Project 2014-15

The lecturers involved in the project prepared a range of materials for the tandem. These included guidelines for the students involved and a set of assessment criteria. A shared *Dropbox* folder was also set up to which the module coordinators in Austria and in Ireland were granted access. The 16 Austrian students of Business English were asked by their lecturer to source job advertisements of interest and relevance to them and, following two introductory classes on the writing of letters of application and Curriculum Vitae, prepared their materials for tandem exchange. Specifically, each student prepared a letter of application for the job as outlined in the advertisement they had sourced and a personal Curriculum Vitae which was also tailored to the particular position. Similarly, the 16 Irish students prepared letters of application and Curriculum Vitae in response to advertisements provided by the lecturer. All of the materials were given by the students to their lecturers who then uploaded them into the shared *Dropbox* folder. The lecturers then distributed the materials from the tandem partner in their respective classrooms. The students devoted one classroom contact hour to analysis of the materials provided by their counterpart and to the preparation of feedback for them. The feedback and the letters on which comments had been written were again submitted to the lecturer, uploaded into the *Dropbox* folder and returned to the individual students who had prepared them.

As this was a pilot project and the lecturers were keen to develop and support the tandem initiative, the feedback provided by the students to one another was analysed from a research perspective with a view to identifying the themes contained within it. Analysis suggested that the feedback could be best grouped under the headings of ‘language-related’ and ‘culture-related’ comments and issues:

In summary, the language-related elements concerned the suitability and range of vocabulary, register, sentence structure and complexity, repetition and inaccurate use of direct or literal translation. The culture-related material, on the other hand, concerned primarily the tone of the letter of application, its structure and the inclusion of particular elements, such as ‘favourite subjects at school’ by the Austrian students or ‘parents’ occupation’, and the need to explain culture-specific concepts and terminology, such as those associated with examinations, levels, school-types and qualifications. Examples highlighted include *Abitur*,

the final German higher level school examination, and *Betriebswirt*, the Austrian equivalent of a business studies graduate (for further detail on the implementation of this pilot, see Bruen and Sudhershan, 2015).

On reviewing the pilot tandem, both lecturers noted a significant increase in engagement with this element of their modules, which as noted above, had proved problematic in the past. All of the students submitted the required materials and engaged actively in reviewing those submitted by their counterparts. In addition, students reported positively on the exercise in their end-of-module evaluations describing it as both interesting and useful.

Reflection on the feedback also resulted in the identification by the researchers involved of a number of possible enhancements to the process. For example, the experience with the pilot suggested that greater structure could be added to the exercise by providing more detailed guidelines to the students on how their feedback to their counterparts could be provided. In this regard, it was decided to develop a series of questions or issues which each student could address in reviewing their counterpart's submissions, while continuing to allow scope for free comments. In addition, it was decided to develop a feedback form specific to this element of the students' modules in order to gather more particular feedback on different aspects of the tandem.

Tandem 2016-17:

Following the positive experience of the tandem during the pilot phase and the design of the new materials, which consisted of a guide for students giving feedback and a short questionnaire designed to elicit feedback from them on their experience of the tandem initiative, the process described above was repeated in 2016-17. Given the success experienced in the pilot phase, it was decided to double the numbers involved to 27 students enrolled on the same module as previously in Austria and 39 students in Ireland¹. Again, the experiences of those involved remained positive with the students supplying all of the required materials and the lecturers observing good engagement with the feedback process in class. The provision of more detailed instruction to the students included a request to them to address the following in their feedback (Figure 1):

¹ Some of the students in Ireland agreed to provide feedback on two sets of applications rather than one in order to cope with the different numbers of participants in Austria and in Ireland.

Figure 1: Feedback Form

| FEEDBACK FORM | |
|--|-------|
| Please write any comments directly related to individual parts of the letter directly onto the letter itself. This will also be sent to your tandem partner. | |
| Name of partner: | _____ |
| Please comment on the following: | |
| Language: | _____ |
| Content: | _____ |
| (Inter)cultural aspects: | _____ |
| Any other comments: | _____ |

21 of the Austrian students also provided detailed, individual feedback on the experience of engaging by completing the evaluation form designed for this purpose (more information about the questionnaire and the results can be obtained by contacting the authors). Salient elements of their feedback suggest that their experience of the tandem was a positive one (average score 4.2). They enjoyed the tandem describing it as "something new" and a "good experience" that benefitted their language skills. In their view, key advantages associated

with the tandem include increased language awareness (e.g. "very good job because now I know which mistake I never will make again"), and greater confidence in applying for jobs in future. The Austrian students also praised the quality of the feedback received although four students also expressed a wish for more detailed feedback and more specific examples, particularly in terms of appropriate vocabulary. Their suggestions for improvement included a desire for more time to prepare their own feedback to the Irish cohort (as expressed by three students) and, more particularly, a 'deepening' of the tandem experience. The comment that 'it would be nice if there were more connection to the other students (picture, videos), this would be more personal and interesting' is representative of the views of four participants.

The students in Ireland provided feedback as part of a classroom group discussion. They also emphasised the fact that they also enjoyed the exercise and the opportunity to connect with their counterparts in Austria. They were impressed with the standard of English displayed which some described as motivating and others as daunting. In general terms, however, the students reported that the exercise helped to bring the study of job applications to life for them and helped them to improve their own letters and Curriculum Vitae. Similar views to those expressed by the Austrian students also emerged as several students commented that there was insufficient direct contact between the two groups and that it would be valuable in the future to explore the possibility of developing deeper relationships. This related to both the frequency and the mode of communication.

Concluding comments:

Based on the positive experiences to date with the e-tandem initiative, it is proposed to continue to develop and implement it as a core element of the Business English and Business German modules offered in the two institutions.

In addition, based on the feedback received from the students, advice from the literature on tandem and e-tandem learning (for example, Coutinho, 2016; Elstermann, 2017) and the lecturers' own observations, it is proposed to make a number of further additions to the design of the tandem on foot of its second iteration:

For example, as touched on in the introduction to this paper, it is widely accepted that two key elements of successful tandem exchange include developing the features of reciprocity and autonomy (Vassallo and Telles, 2006). These features involve deepening the relationship between the pairs involved and ensuring that they take greater personal responsibility for the

learning process. In order to strengthen the relationship between future cohorts of students participating in this initiative, it is intended to share drafts of their materials between the pairs more than once over the course of the semester. Each participant will be given the opportunity to give feedback focussing on suggestions for improvements at each stage. In this way, it is hoped to ensure that the learning process facilitated by this tandem is more of a developmental one over the course of the module, rather than a once-off learning experience.

It is also hoped to be able to introduce a face-to-face element to the tandem, potentially in the form of a job interview via a platform such as Skype or a similar alternative. Such an addition to the e-tandem could require groups of students in one country acting as an interview panel, or single interviewer for their counterparts and vice versa. In this way, it is hoped to continue to enhance the learning experience and language acquisition process for those students involved in this e-tandem exercise. Ongoing reflection on and research into the process and its impact remain an additional priority.

Finally, as touched upon in the introduction to this paper, the model presented here can be easily used and adapted to suit a wide range of learning and teaching contexts in Switzerland of which the following are just a couple of the opportunities available: In a university setting, for instance, logistical difficulties relating to the search for tandem partners can be overcome thanks to the ongoing internationalisation of higher education as universities can take advantage of, for example, their Erasmus international partner network to find potential e-tandem participants. Moreover, the model lends itself to being used in various branches of English for Specific Purposes. For instance, in English for Science and Technology contexts, learners can prepare, exchange and provide feedback on other types of discipline-relevant texts such as research grant applications or product specifications. In a secondary and primary school context, where the focus is increasingly on the greater integration of culture teaching and learning into the study of foreign languages, emphasis can be placed on using telecollaboration to develop students' intercultural competence, for example, through an examination of and reflection on cultural artefacts via synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication.

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