

Tea Time: Feedback Observation within Tandem Learning

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Abstract *With the advent of the internet, virtual language learning has become accessible to students across the globe. One approach out of a multitude of online options is tandem learning. While this form ensures learners' autonomy, participants' reciprocity, and an equally allotted time for each language, there are several other factors involved in the execution of a fruitful tandem session. These include elements such as multimodality, synchronicity, and feedback exchange. The current literature also highlights an urgent need for learners to be trained in feedback provision. To address this, I have designed an activity for tandem learning. I put forth that the observation of feedback between students is an important component to feedback training which may promote metalinguistic discussions and generate cross-linguistic awareness – skills valuable for any language learner.*

Keywords *tandem learning; feedback observation; e-tandem; computer-mediated communication (CMC)*

1. Introduction

The concept of tandem language learning consists of two native speakers of different languages engaging in communication, with the objective of learning each other's language (Cziko, 2004). This model has evolved to include communication on web-based platforms and can be understood as a type of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). The benefits of this form are its low cost and wide range of multimedia possibilities (Cziko, 2004). An additional advantage about the CMC model is the option for students from different parts of the world to connect, thereby encouraging an environment for cross-cultural exchange. This is useful as learners may communicate with tandem partners and use the target language in an authentic setting.

This teaching activity is situated in a curriculum developed for students at Chemnitz University of Technology and a cooperating university in Canada. The curriculum focuses on improving students' creative writing skills via e-tandem learning as part of a Buddy Programme. The activity aims to equip learners with the necessary skills in providing corrective feedback to their German and Canadian peers. With a focus on the collaborative and participatory method (Meyer et al., 2022), the activity will concentrate on instances

of social interaction in groups (Johnson & Johnson, 1993, p. 142) while calling for individual accountability (Kramsch, 1987, p. 21; Macaro, 1997, p. 143) as students learn to provide and accept feedback.

Several terms will be used throughout this chapter. I suggest the following definitions for ease of understanding. The participants' first language (L1) in the context of this curriculum would be either German or English. The term 'source language' will be used interchangeably with the term L1. While L2 usually refers to a learner's second language, some participants might already know additional languages prior to this e-tandem session. As such, L2 is referred here more generally as the language they are learning via the Buddy Programme. Finally, the term 'target language' will be used interchangeably with the term L2. For the students in Germany, that would be the English language, and for the students in Canada, it would be the German language.

2. Literature Review

This section will explain core concepts surrounding the activity design. The teaching activity draws its inspiration from a theoretical foundation as well as from case studies. A major thread arising from these case studies is the need for learners to be trained in providing feedback (Litzler et al., 2018; La Russa & Nuzzo, 2021; Sato & Lyster, 2012; Xu et al., 2019).

2.1. Central Terms

There are three principles guiding **tandem** learning (Brammerts, 2003; Telles & Vassallo, 2006):

- (1) **Autonomy:** Each participant is responsible for setting their own goals and for managing their learning.
- (2) **Reciprocity:** Participants should benefit equally from the collaboration.
- (3) **Separate use of languages:** There should be an equal amount of practice time for each language involved.

An aspect of tandem is the use of video-conferencing tools like Skype or Zoom. This means that communication of information may take place in various **modes**. These modes can be understood as textual, aural, and visual (Guichon & Cohen, 2016). For example, the chat function in Skype represents information conveyed in the textual mode. Correspondingly, a webcam image or the shared screen function would be categorized as the visual mode.

While the definition of **feedback** has changed over the years, this teaching activity will focus on feedback as "an interactive process of exchanging information" (Schluer, 2022, p. 17). This exchange is vital for learners to deepen their current understanding in order to improve their language skills. In this case, peer corrective feedback is the reciprocal activity whereby learners provide verbal or written feedback on each other's written production (La Russa & Nuzzo, 2021).

The nature of tandem offers a mix of both formal and informal **learning environments** (Cziko, 2004). While a classroom setting might be structured, an informal environment like talking to a native speaker outside the classroom helps students use the target language as a “medium of authentic communication” (Cziko, 2004, p.25). In his paper, Cziko (2004) explains that the downside of a formal learning environment is the limited opportunity for L2 production along with limited cultural knowledge. Conversely, the downside of an informal learning environment is the lack of corrective feedback and attention to the learner’s grammar. In this light, the activity offers learners a combination of both formal and informal settings.

Synchronous activities may take the form of in-class lectures, live webinars, or instant messaging. While **synchronous** learning enables immediate social interaction, feedback, and clarification, it faces challenges in terms of scheduling and technical difficulties (Perveen, 2016). On the other hand, **asynchronous** activities may include Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), pre-recorded video lessons, or online forums. These arrangements mean that students can work at their own pace and have ample time to engage with the material (Perveen, 2016). Asynchronous activities may also be accessible to a wide range of students. However, there is limited social interaction, and feedback or correction might be delayed.

2.2. Prior Studies

The suggested activity is inspired by the collaborative method (Johnson & Johnson, 1993, p. 139; Macaro, 1997, p. 134; Meyer et al., 2022; Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 192; Yang, 2023) as well as findings from three case studies. It is a type of learner-generated collaboration (Macaro, 1997, p. 138).

The first case study is a quasi-experimental project conducted by Sato and Lyster (2012). They found that peer interaction provided opportunities for repeated production practice, which contributed to fluency development. Additionally, corrective feedback helped learners to monitor both their own language production and that of their peers (Sato & Lyster, 2012). This contributed to accuracy development.

The second example proposes that peer interaction supported the development of metalinguistic reflection in learners within “peer-to-peer native/non-native online communication” (La Russa & Nuzzo, 2021, p. 87). Their study found that feedback-discussing tasks stimulated learners to actively reflect on both source and target language. This corroborates with Sato and Lyster’s (2012) findings. To take advantage of the benefits of peer interaction, the design of this activity will include interaction between L1 and L2 learners, as well as between L1 and L1 learners learning an L2. For instance, the interaction between a German learner and a Canadian learner, as well as between two German learners learning English.

Finally, Freschi and Cavalari’s (2020) analysis of a case study highlights how learners utilize the affordances of multimodality to provide feedback. The current body of literature calls attention to an urgent need for learners to be trained in feedback provision. There are several aspects that explain learners’ inhibition during feedback provision; one of which is the desire to ‘save face’ for the self and the partner, as well as an unfamiliarity with how or when corrective feedback should be given (Xu et al., pp. 337–340). In

this light, the following activity is designed to scaffold learners' understanding towards feedback.

3. Description of the Teaching Activity

The goal of this activity is twofold. Firstly, it aims to help learners engage with the feedback provided by their peers by incorporating changes into their text. Additionally, it intends to give learners a chance to observe how their peers provide feedback. This, in turn, teaches them to be feedback providers themselves. The name of this activity is "Tea Time Discussion". This activity hopes to recreate the feeling of familiarity like when a group of friends gather around for tea and snacks.

3.1. Target Group

This activity would fit well with learners who are able to articulate themselves independently. Learners should be interested in getting to know people from other cultural backgrounds as this is a feature of tandem learning. It would also be necessary that they understand the basic functions of a computer or online video-conferencing tools.

3.2. Description

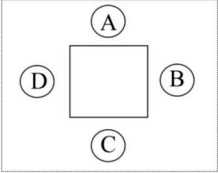
Located in session 9 of a course plan, this teaching idea would ideally be in the middle of a 15-week university semester. This ensures that feedback provision can be practiced when there is a certain level of trust among the participants. At the same time, participants will be able to build an understanding of feedback provision for subsequent sessions. The duration is stipulated at 30 minutes for group work and an extra 5 minutes for individual work. The optimal number of learners would be 16, with equal representation from Germany and Canada. The class will be divided into groups of 4, with two students from each country. The materials needed for this would be a stable internet connection, a functioning webcam and microphone, access to Word Document or Pages, and a link for the students to join via Zoom or BigBlueButton (or similar programs).

The learners will need to have gone through sessions 1 to 8 of the course. Should they have missed the previous session, they must work on their text asynchronously beforehand and bring it to class for session 9. Students will need to be prepared to edit their text.

The activity will be implemented online and students will work in breakout rooms in small groups of four persons (A, B, C, D). One student (Student A) will share his or her screen, displaying the text composed in the target language. Another student (Student C) will look through the text to provide feedback for 15 minutes, while Student A clarifies any doubts. During the 15 minutes of their interaction, Students B and D will need to observe how feedback is provided. If they would like to join the conversation, they should use the chat function. This reduces any potential disruption in the initial stages of one-to-one feedback provision (Guichon et al., 2012, p. 195). A separate feedback session may be conducted with the entire class afterwards to talk over underlying communication

issues. After this activity, another 30 minutes could be allocated to ensure that participants now communicate in the other target language (German). The aim is to generate discussions about feedback provision. Below is an example of the task instructions for this activity (Table 1).

Table 1: Task Instructions for Tea Time Feedback Observation

Step	Instruction
1.	<p>Enter the breakout room. You will be in a room with 3 other students. Label yourselves A to D.</p> <p>A (German): _____</p> <p>B (German): _____</p> <p>C (Canadian): _____</p> <p>D (Canadian): _____</p> 
2.	A (German) will now share his/her screen.
3.	<p>- C (Canadian) will look through the text and provide corrective feedback via audio, webcam, and chat. This will last for 15 minutes, during which A (German) will clarify any questions.</p> <p>- B (German) and D (Canadian) will observe how the feedback is provided. You may provide additional corrective feedback when deemed suitable. However, you are to type it into the chat. If you think it is appropriate to jump in and join the conversation, you may unmute your microphone and do so.</p> <p><i>Note: Your language of communication should be English.</i></p>
4.	After 15 minutes, B (German) will now share his/her screen.
5.	<p>- D (Canadian) will look through the text and provide corrective feedback via audio, webcam, and chat. This will last for another 15 minutes where B (German) may ask any questions or comment on the feedback.</p> <p>- A (German) and C (Canadian) will now observe how feedback is provided and received. You may provide feedback as you wish through the chat function. However, if you would like to clarify something, you may join their conversation to add your ideas/opinion.</p> <p><i>Note: Your language of communication should be English.</i></p>
6.	After 15 minutes, you now have 5 minutes of individual time to edit your work or to reflect on the feedback process. What would you do differently? How would you provide feedback the next time?

3.3. Affordances

Studies have shown a change in language learning and attitude towards L2 in collaborative work and tandem learning (Gonçalves et al., 2020; Tian & Wang, 2010; Tolosa et al., 2017). Johnson and Johnson (1993) found interpersonal feedback to be one of the most beneficial and successful sources of feedback (p. 136). This means receiving feedback from other learners. In allowing learners to lead discussions with their peers, this activity also hopes to encourage them to be more self-directed. Learners will have a chance to decide when and how they provide feedback to their peers. They will have the opportunity to work through different modes (text, audio, visual) in order to bring their feedback across. This would promote autonomy and increase their self-awareness (La Russa & Nuzzo, 2021; Macaro, 1997, p.143).

The activity of teaching learners to provide feedback hopes to encourage them to engage in metalinguistic discussions as in the study by La Russa and Nuzzo (2021). In their study, students tapped on cross-linguistic knowledge and reflected on both their source and target languages as a result of the tandem exchange. The reflection on discussions might help students question the internalized linguistic features they have, and also observe aspects of culture embedded in the language. During feedback provision, they will have a chance to revise any errors in their understanding whilst applying similar principles in their L2.

The materials used in this activity will come from the students themselves. They will be required to compose a text in the target language during the previous session. During this activity, learners will get a chance to communicate in the target language while working to improve their texts. This will provide them with an opportunity to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes (Tomlinson, 2011, p. 15). Secondly, they will obtain corrective feedback by their tandem partners. This will expose them to the L2 language in authentic use as well as the linguistic features of the L2 (Tomlinson, 2011, pp.13–14). Finally, their self-generated peer-corrected text may become part of an e-portfolio. This will enable students to track their progress and facilitate self-investment (Malecka et al., 2022; Tomlinson, 2011, p.12).

3.4. Limitations

As much as tandem learning provides valuable benefits to learners, there are some considerations to bear in mind. Firstly, any proficiency differences within the two groups of tandem learners should be overcome. This was highlighted in a study by Tian and Wang (2010) between learners of Mandarin and of English. To achieve this, it would be good to first conduct a proficiency test for every participant and assign them groups according to their levels of proficiency.

Another study by Xu et al. (2019) brought to light six different factors to be taken into account before and during feedback provision. These are (i) provider-related factors, (ii) receiver-related factors, (iii) task-related factors, (iv) error-related factors, (v) interpersonal factors, and (vi) teacher-related factors (Xu et al., 2019, pp. 337–340). This activity is designed to consider the first and second factor by teaching learners how to provide feedback through peer observation, and raising their awareness such that they can prac-

tice it during the lesson. This activity also hopes to overcome the fifth factor by assigning learners in groups of 4 to provide and to observe corrective feedback. I recognize that some learners may be shy when it comes to providing feedback; therefore, the activity will give them the opportunity to sit back and communicate through the chat function. At the same time, these learners will be encouraged to engage with their peers through turn-taking.

3.5. Possible Adaptations for Other Learner Groups

This activity may be used in higher education. However, more scaffolding needs to be incorporated in order for participants to fully understand the expectations of the activity. A pre-activity task may be included so that they are conscious about accepting and providing feedback. For example, before going into e-tandem breakout rooms, they can discuss in small groups about situations outside the classroom where they had given or received feedback, and how it made them feel. This metatalk would raise their awareness about feedback and prepare them for the activity (Mueller-Hartmann & Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2011).

Alternatively, this activity can be done asynchronously. Groups can work on each other's texts at their own pace within a set time frame. This would be helpful for learners who are shy or unable to verbally express themselves well.

4. Conclusion

There is a wide range of possibilities where learners can be empowered to direct their own learning. Within the realms of online tandem learning, it is necessary to incorporate activities that comprise temporality (a/synchronous), modality (aural, visual, textual), bilingualism (German/English), feedback (peer-peer, facilitator-peer, peer-facilitator, training), and digitalization (via video-conferencing tools and online platforms). A major affordance of tandem learning are the cultural discussions during the exchange of languages. As Canagarajah (2012) highlights in his paper on intercultural discourse, "rather than focusing on rules and conventions, we have to focus on strategies of communication" (p.129). Indeed, we have to help learners navigate between cultures and communities as the world shifts away from one single cultural tradition. The exchange of information within tandems is thus aimed at not only improving their language skills, but also sharpen their ability to detect linguistic features (Macaro, 1997, p. 144). This way, the skills acquired can be transferred to other languages they pick up in the future.

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Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Ms. Yarong Liu for her guidance and facilitation throughout the module on curriculum planning. Without the group discussions, this teaching activity would not have been developed.

