

# Case Study 11

## Language Learning in Tandem

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### 1. The context

In 1998, changes in structure at the University of Manchester brought together for the first time the English Language Teaching Unit and 'Languagewise' (the foreign language programme for non-specialist students) under the aegis of the Language Centre. It soon became apparent to the authors of this case study (one from English language and one from Modern Foreign Languages) that there was much room for collaboration: we both had students who would greatly benefit from increased contact over the national divides. We had heard of Tandem schemes before: there is a very successful international scheme run from Bochum in Germany, and the University of Sheffield in the UK has also been a key player in this area. We decided therefore that we might adopt the principle of Tandem Learning for a small pilot project involving both British and overseas students.

What exactly is Tandem Learning? In language learning and teaching terms, Tandem is a reciprocal programme in which students are paired to work on tasks of mutual interest. It has the advantages of increased contact with native speakers, enhanced opportunities for extended oral practice, ease of deciding when and where partners should meet, and opportunities for individuals to engage in more specialised language learning in fields such as engineering, medical science or chemistry. All of these areas had been singled out by students in evaluation questionnaires as being lacking in conventional classroom-based course units.

As a result of the success of the pilot scheme, we were encouraged to offer the programme as a credit-rated course unit from September 1999. We offer 10 credits in the first semester, followed by an optional further 10 credits in the second. This allows students to 'step on and step off' if they so



wish though in practice, we find that the majority of students complete the two semesters with their original partner. We spend a good deal of time designing the tasks which they are required to do. These are different every semester and are written according to certain principles which we will outline in the second section of this article. Initially, there were certain resource implications in managing the scheme; the course organisers are competent in French, Spanish and English but we also offer the course to German and Italian students. We therefore applied for 'Enterprise in Higher Education' funding to employ assistance in these areas and have twice been successful in obtaining this. Subsequent changes in personnel arrangements mean that we can now provide for tutoring and examining from within our own staff.

What sort of students typically enter the Tandem programme? Because it is vitally important that partnerships do not break down – not one but two students would lose credits if this occurred – we have to be careful in selecting those who we think will be capable of working in this way. It must be remembered that after the first induction and introduction sessions, students work on their own, without any formal 'face-to-face' guidance from the tutors. They must be both mature and motivated. We require therefore that students be in the second year or above and that they be advanced learners of their target language (post 'A' level). We divert students whom we do not believe to be sufficiently enthusiastic or committed to the programme to another 'buddy' programme of a similar nature but

which is non-credit rated and informal. We have until recently supported a web-based learning package which hosts both discussion groups and a virtual seminar. We have moved this session over to WebCT which continues to act as a locus for debate within the Tandem students' cohort. Otherwise, we use email in order to keep in touch with students. We also host a very successful 'end of session' social activity.

As can be imagined, assessment of such a course unit has been a problematic area and despite many different versions of assessment descriptors, we are still not completely satisfied with the current criteria. However, we are aware that we are not alone in having problems in assessing progress, process, autonomy and reflection, and we await further developments from colleagues in the fields of testing and assessment.

## 2. Design principles

Having set up the Tandem scheme and ensured that it works successfully, we decided to use the fact that we have a small but manageable student cohort engaged in innovative activities, to investigate certain aspects of language learning.

Firstly, we realised that the nature of the tasks which students were asked to complete was crucial to the success of the programme. Although students are asked to sit a timed written test and to submit a speaking task, greater weight is nevertheless given to the compilation of a

learning dossier. This comprises a record of the tasks undertaken, students' reflections on the tasks they have completed, and the advice and corrective feedback given by their partner. After reflection, we decided that we should adopt three basic principles in our task design – autonomy, reciprocity and authenticity.

### *Autonomy*

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Although students were provided with an overall framework, tasks were designed so that students could 'take control of their learning' (Holec 1983, p.3). They were encouraged to negotiate, plan and co-manage their work, without constant referral to tutors or supervisors. There were three reasons for this. Firstly, in order to make any headway in a foreign language, learners must have the skills, self-reliance and confidence to learn outside the formal class situation (Dickenson and Carver, 1980). Secondly, being able to work autonomously is a transferable skill and thus valuable in many other situations. Thirdly, many of our students are either preparing for or beginning a period abroad where they will be required to function autonomously in academic, linguistic and social settings.

### *Reciprocity*

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It was clear to us at the outset that the Tandem scheme would break down if each student in the pair did not give and receive in equal proportions. Partners are required to spend a roughly equivalent amount of time

speaking their target language, preparing the task and giving feedback on work already completed. Underpinning this reciprocal arrangement is the assumption that students are 'knowers' of the target language and thus will see the need and opportunity to assist their partners as learners (Curran 1972 p.99).

### *Authenticity*

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That language tasks should be as authentic as possible is axiomatic. Real language output enhances levels of learner motivation and better prepares the student for using the target language in real situations. We achieved authenticity in five ways:

- by designing the tasks around a real information or opinion gap, so that students had a real reason or need for communicating with their partner
- by approximating the learning tasks to real life tasks
- through the need to negotiate times, venues, task choice and other learning decisions, all of which require real interaction to solve real issues
- by learning and practising in normal, out-of-class situations without the constraints of teacher, other students, classroom layout and environment
- by encouraging relationships with native speakers – that is, with real users of the target language.

### *Task structure*

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In order to give shape to the learning tasks, we drew on a model for classroom based tasks suggested by Skehan (1996). It consists of four stages:

#### **1. Pre-task stage**

Students plan and preview new language independently before embarking on their collaborative work. This enables them to ease the processing load when working on the task, thus freeing the brain to concentrate on fluency and accuracy of language.

#### **2. Interactive stage**

This is where students come together to discuss the question in hand and can take the form of a discussion, question and answer session or short presentation.

Examples of tasks are:

- students find out about and compare levels of environmental awareness and government responses to environmental issues in their partner's countries
- students are asked to find out about and compare changing attitudes to family life and family relationships in their respective countries.

This stage clearly offers the most opportunity for fluency development.

#### **3. Post-task stage 1**

This is an advisory stage where students give and receive corrective feedback on the oral performance of both partners. They are asked to encourage their partners to self-correct and to explore contrastive differences between the two languages, arising from the analysis of errors. This stage may also include feedback in the areas of pronunciation, lexis and grammar.

#### **4. Post-task stage 2**

The information obtained during the interaction is written up in the form required. Initial drafts are corrected by the partner and a subsequent draft produced. Both versions are included in the final dossier/portfolio. In this stage, students focus on accuracy of the written form and on the integration of new language suggested at stage 2.

### **3. Research issues 1 – error correction**

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Overall, this four-stage model seemed to work sufficiently well for us to be able to turn our attention to an area which we had perceived as problematic. As noted above, post-task stage 1 concerns error correction and feedback. Although some students were both conscientious and competent in correcting their partner's language mistakes, in both oral and written mode, others were not. We felt therefore that this issue had to be addressed. Having trawled the literature in this area, we concluded that very little had been written about the



characteristics and effectiveness of corrective feedback in reciprocal arrangements such as Tandem. We therefore decided to look in detail at the quantity and quality of corrective feedback which had been generated by our own students over both semesters in 2000.

### *Method*

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Forty Six students took part in the study. They were asked to record their oral performance of one task and the feedback which this generated from their partner. In the first instance, 9.5 hours of recordings were made. We used a modified version of the typology developed by Lyster and Ranta (1997) to analyse feedback moves. These included 'recasts' (reformulation of errors without explicitly indicating an error had occurred), requests for clarification, explicit corrections, elicitation (whereby the corrector attempts to elicit or encourage the speaker to provide the correct form) and repetition (in which the corrector repeats the error in isolation, with perhaps a slight rise in intonation). Our analysis produced the following results:

- Errors occurred primarily in grammar. About half of these (n=264) were corrected by the partner.
- Correction might take place either during or post-task. Corrections made during task tended to focus first on lexis, second on pronunciation. This is understandable, given the need for feedback to be quick and simple if the corrector is not to disrupt fluency.
- During task feedback tended towards 'recast', the quickest and least disruptive of all feedback types. Many students were able to repeat the recast in what Lyster and Ranta (1997) call 'learner uptake'.
- Post-task feedback tended towards the correction of grammar items, most of which had been noted down by the corrector for explanation at a later stage.
- Post-task feedback also tended towards the explicit – that is correction based on the explanation of specific grammar points. This stage was often a site for confusion – European students have a much better understanding of grammar than our UK students and often confused them with unfamiliar terminology. Conversely, UK students misled their partners with partial or inaccurate explanations of errors. We were able to give advice to students on how to avoid these problems by producing a 'help' sheet – see 'Outcomes' below.
- Interestingly, but not perhaps surprisingly, what we called 'teacherly techniques' were not much used by our students. 'Teacherly techniques', such as elicitation and contrastive analysis, are those which tend to be used by trained teachers. It perhaps needs to be emphasised here that our students are not teachers and are not intended to replace them, but rather to complement and enhance performance in other learning situations.
- There were, however, other areas in which we felt that our students outperformed the conventional teacher. They were very sensitive when picking up

mistakes (or slips of the tongue) rather than errors and giving their partner the benefit of the doubt in this area. They were also excellent in maintaining the use of the target language throughout the session (not an easy thing to do as those of us who are practising modern language teachers can vouch). Similarly, students seemed much more proactive in Tandem than in the conventional classroom. They did not wait to be corrected but actively sought feedback, spontaneously asking for advice on grammar points, lexis, further points for improvement and so on.



### *Outcomes*

Armed with much more information about what was going on in student feedback sessions, we decided on the following actions. Firstly, we now run an 'error correction' workshop at the beginning of the semester where students discuss a series of affirmations which we believe cover the areas in which they need to be sensitized. We have run a number of these sessions to date and believe that they encourage student awareness of what, how and when to correct. Secondly, we have produced a 'help' sheet – a short A4-sized document which we believe addresses the main issues. We have not been able to reproduce our first study to discover whether indeed these measures have made any appreciable difference but we are both more confident that students are better equipped to undertake this part of the Tandem scheme.

## **4. Research issues 2 – cross-cultural communication**

The second area which we wished to develop was that of cross-cultural communication. This is a growing field – in academia, in international business and management, as well as in politics at local and national level. Its interest for us as language teachers is evident. We were also keen to use an electronic conferencing software package which had just been introduced into the Faculty of Arts at the University of Manchester. We therefore decided to combine these interests and set up an on-line seminar to explore cross-cultural issues.

Why an on-line seminar? The very nature of the Tandem scheme makes it difficult for students to attend face-to-face meetings. As students come from a wide range of departments across the University, time-tabling difficulties are such that ensuring reasonable numbers attend a scheduled seminar has proved almost impossible. To allow students to access a seminar when and where they liked was an obvious solution. In addition, numbers on the course are such that face-to-face discussion management has proved problematic whereas an on-line seminar would allow large numbers to participate in a way that would otherwise be impossible.

Having established that we wished to use an on-line seminar as our vehicle for discussion, it remained for us to decide which issues we wished to raise and in what format. Recent developments in language learning and teaching have placed more emphasis on enabling students to perform in a range of cross-cultural situations rather than attempting to achieve a native-like competence in their target language and culture. The cross-cultural approach emphasizes flexibility and sensitivity when confronted with representatives of other cultures; this implies an awareness and understanding of underlying cultural differences which may otherwise lead to failures in communication. Rather than merely learning *about* other cultures, students need to develop an ability to recognise and evaluate 'otherness' from an informed and objective point of view. Interestingly, a number of studies have shown that, far from returning with positive attitudes towards their target culture, many exchange students come home with reinforced and negative stereotypes (Coleman 1996). What is happening to cause such an effect? It has been

suggested that students lack the training and preparation they need to meet the challenges they will surely meet on their year abroad.

We decided therefore to adopt the 'critical incident' approach to help sensitize students to others' problems and to encourage analysis of why these problems had arisen in the first place. A 'critical incident', as used in cross-cultural training, is a short account of a misunderstanding or clash which takes place between members of different cultures. Students are then invited to comment. We opted to write our own critical incident based on an amalgam of incidents which we knew our students had experienced when abroad. This differed from the classic 'critical incident' where only one cross-cultural issue is the subject of focus and answers are closed (multiple-choice). We posted our critical incident on the web and awaited further developments. We had not made participation in the seminar compulsory because we were still hesitant about possible problems, but nevertheless, we received 59 replies in total.

### *Results and discussion*

After analysis of the 59 replies, we concluded that a narrative or thread had emerged which began with conflict and ended with resolution. At the outset it was the European students who responded to the incident, keen to acknowledge its commonality and the empathy they felt towards the chief protagonist.

*The incident is totally realistic: I have lived exactly the same experience. The first weeks here were terrible for me... (11/1/00)*

Similar messages provoked a backlash on the part of home students, some of whom felt that a kind of 'Britbashing' was taking place.

*I feel that while I have every sympathy for José, English people seem to come out as the villains – characterized by their ignorance, intolerance and anti-social behaviour. (14/11/00).*

Following this, other students, both UK and overseas, reacted to reduce the apparent conflict and invite resolution. Final postings were conciliatory in character, pointing to similar attitudes in Europe or drawing attention to the fact that there is good and bad in all societies. We noticed two sorts of dynamics therefore: besides the more obvious conflict, reconciliation and resolution, there was a mirroring of the 'culture shock' experience, where after either an initial 'love affair' with or rejection of the target culture, foreigners come to

realize that the new society in which they live is much like any other – multi-faceted with characteristics which may or may not be agreeable to them. One interesting development which we had not expected was the openness and honesty of the discussion. Such frankness would be unusual in a face-to-face seminar group and it gave us a window into emotions that we would not normally have been party to.

Can we affirm that students' values and perceptions had changed as a result of the seminar discussion? Clearly not. However, the end-of-term evaluation questionnaire showed that 75 per cent of our students had felt 'a lot more culturally aware' than at the outset. Also, students' written evaluations of the seminar were very positive. The dominant theme to emerge was that students appreciated the opportunity to make contact with people from other cultures and to discuss their ideas and experiences. One student wrote for example:

It's an excellent system for people who haven't lived or studied abroad to learn about the problems and situations facing those who visit Manchester.

Besides the exploration of cross-cultural issues, there were other positive spin-offs from the on-line discussion. It was much easier for the less confident or proficient students to participate without losing face. They could work out what they wish to say beforehand and intervene at any point. Similarly, students were freed from the



inhibitory presence of their teachers – neither of us intervened in any way. This anonymity no doubt encourages the frankness which has already been noted. As Warschauer (1997) has pointed out, the on-line seminar is a ‘democratic’ and student-led, self-directed forum in which the locus of control has shifted to students.

## 5. Impact and lessons learned

So what impact has the Tandem scheme had on us the course tutors, on the students, on our School (Modern Languages) and on the University as a whole? It may seem like overweening pride to think that we have influenced people beyond the narrow circle in which we operate, but in some small part, it is true. On a personal level, both members of the team have profited greatly from working together on a series of collaborative ventures. Previously, we were slightly isolated, coming together under what might have been seen as the rather artificial umbrella of the Language Centre. Now we are collaborating as true colleagues, and bringing in others to work on an expanding team. We have begun to introduce a research culture into the Language Centre, having published a number of articles on our work and spoken at seminars, workshops and conferences both at the University of Manchester and elsewhere. Since starting the pilot project in 1998, one of us has been

promoted to Senior Lecturer. While not attributing this success entirely to the Tandem Scheme, there is no doubt that it did play a part.

As for students, some of them have gained even more than we have. Home students have more choice of course units at Advanced level than they had in the past, with real possibilities of choosing modules which will suit their own learning styles. But it is our overseas students who have really gained. Integrating into British society is notoriously difficult. Previous to Tandem, many foreign students simply never met UK students of their own age; they tended either to remain relatively isolated or to become friends with other foreign students. If they take part in the Tandem scheme, they will at least have one weekly meeting with their British partner. But often it goes much further than this. Students are introduced into their partner’s circle of friends: they cook together, go to the cinema together, even go to visit their partner’s home and family. This is good for the individual, but it is also good for the institution. Well-integrated foreign students will go home and spread the word that Manchester is a friendly and welcoming place in which to spend a year abroad.

As for the impact we have made on the School of Modern Languages, from members of staff being initially wary and even dismissive of the benefits of the scheme, we now have students in both the Italian and Spanish departments who are enrolled on the programme, with lecturers themselves involved in managing and assessing participants. Indeed the only thing which prevents us from widening access is a shortfall in foreign students to partner our home students.

At institutional level, we have enrolled a range of students from almost every Faculty in the University. Again, departments which were initially suspicious of the value and academic rigour of the programme have been convinced, usually by students, of its worth. We have presented a number of workshops and seminars for university staff. The ultimate accolade was the receipt of a joint University of Manchester and UMIST prize at the 2000 Innovation in the Curriculum Awards.

What have we learned from all this? Firstly, perhaps, that small seeds can produce a great deal of fruit. We started very modestly, with a pilot project. When this proved

successful, we gained confidence in moving the project forwards. We tried not to take too many risks at a time – but we learned that some risks did have to be taken.

Confronting a number of sceptical committees was not always easy – neither was pushing the boat out and seeing whether our students could row. It is quite frightening to let go of students, to give them control over their own learning. At the back of our minds were a number of niggling fears. What happens if they never meet up with their partners, if they don't hand in their dossiers, if they do not attend the final examination? Remember that after the early meetings, there is no more face-to-face contact with tutors. We had to learn to trust the students, to relinquish our control and to hand over responsibility. And we have been rewarded in our trust. Out of the several hundred students who have now participated in the scheme, only a handful have not met the challenge – and they would probably have proved problematic in the more conservative class-based course unit as well.



## 6. Personal reflection – what did this mean for us?

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Apart from the points outlined above, both tutor organisers have gained in a variety of ways. As members of the Language Centre, which until recently has been outside the departmental structure, we felt isolated from the mainstream affairs of the University. We existed to service other departments, not to have a real-life existence of our own. We feel that Tandem has changed that. It has made us part of the daily life and interests of the institution. In recognising the worth of our endeavours, we feel ourselves more valued. We now belong.

Similarly, as members of the Centre, we had no obligation to engage in research. Both of us felt uncomfortable about this. Again, it was an isolating factor which prevented us from sharing one of the major areas of interest in our institution. However, both of us have heavy administrative and teaching loads. How could we hope to function on a day-to-day basis and do research as well? The answer was, of course, to build a research interest into our teaching. To do that, we needed to be involved in something innovative – hence the Tandem project.

Being involved in research brings its own rewards. It enables us to keep up-to-date with the vast literature in the field of language learning and teaching. It ensures that we go to seminars or conferences and have something to contribute. It makes us part of the academic community. But probably more important than this for both of us, the research we are involved in is eminently practical. There is a clear relationship between the research we carry out and the course which it feeds. Each area that we have looked at (task design, error correction and cross-cultural communication) has led to improvements in overall design and delivery of the programme. For us, this is most important.

And this is not the end. Both of us are full of ideas for the future development of Tandem. We know there is much work to be done in the fields of reflection, assessment and the concept of process and progress. It is stimulating to hear of developments elsewhere and to wonder if and how they can be applied to Tandem. We have ambitious plans to introduce our students to independent research through the accumulation and analysis of raw data, and are already on the way to collecting our first results on how this is working. We do not intend to rest on our laurels.

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