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Strategy instruction for successful language tandems

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Educational institutions are placing increased value on language tandems owing to the language development opportunities they offer for learners of modern languages. Where these learners lack autonomous language learning strategies, however, the results can be disappointing, with limited linguistic development taking place. This paper reports on recent research into the language tandem experiences of international study abroad students during their period of study at a British university. When it became apparent that the students lacked skills in managing their language tandems to meet their learning needs, strategy instruction was introduced to facilitate more effective language learning strategy use. The findings suggest that such an intervention can significantly increase learners' ability to create a language tandem which meets their learning needs.

Introduction

In this article, I define language tandems as planned, directed or non-directed encounters in which an expert user of one language facilitates language learning, either face-to-face or through mediated communication, for a non-expert language user in a reciprocal manner. An example of this would be where participant A is an English speaker, participant B is an Italian speaker, and they help each other to learn their target languages. Such a definition seeks to advance earlier, established versions in three distinct aspects: firstly, it explicitly recognises the existence of 'directed encounters' (in which partnered language learners on structured programmes undertake specified tasks in two agreed languages) and those which are 'non-directed' (learners themselves negotiate the structure and content of the language tandem). Secondly, it acknowledges the role that communication technology, such as Skype, is increasingly playing in facilitating diverse forms of distance tandem communication (Pomino and Gil-Salom 2016). Finally, previous definitions have often referred to the 'native speaker' whereas I argue that such exclusion of non-L1 expert users of a language does not accurately describe the full range of possible tandem encounters.

The potential of the language tandem for facilitating language learning is well-established as tandems provide a naturalistic context for communicative language use and a level of individual performance feedback not possible in the traditional classroom (see, for example, Calvert 1999). Additionally, tandems can provide a strong social dimension to language learning, which can add to the intrinsic interest of the language learning process and produce favourable attitudes towards users of the target language and the language itself (Calvert and Brammerts 2003). With increasing recognition of the limitations of traditional classroom-based learning (Richards 2015), language tandem growth, facilitated in part through technological developments in digital platforms, constitutes part of a trend towards informal language learning. In recent years, the potential of language tandems for learning has been increasingly seized upon at an institutional level as a means of facilitating students' foreign language development (Pomino and Gil-Salom op cit.). Such initiatives have included both directed, materials-centred (and often credit-bearing) courses and, for example, the provision of platforms for learners to locate tandem partners, often in conjunction with

self-access areas, as an extra-curricular activity. It is the latter of these two developments, the growth of non-directed language tandems within educational institutions, which is the focus of this paper.

Two central principles have been identified as underpinning the successful language tandem: reciprocity and autonomy (Calvert and Brammerts op cit.). It stands to reason that fairness and cooperation are intrinsic to the effective functioning of such language development arrangements and that 'learners should be prepared […] to do as much for their partner as they themselves expect their partner to do' (Brammerts 1996: 11). Autonomy, which occurs 'when the learner takes responsibility for his [or her] learning and undertakes all of the management tasks concerned with it' (Dickinson 1987: 15) is similarly central to such learning development which takes place independently of teacher direction. However, not only is such autonomy complex in nature but it is not automatic and therefore needs to be developed. Indeed, as Calvert (op cit.) observes, individual learners demonstrate differing levels of expertise in shaping language tandem encounters to meet their learning needs:

> Observations of tandem learners repeatedly highlight concerns about
> the quality of learning and lack of awareness of the processes involved
> in learning a language on the part of the learners (Calvert ibid.: 58)

This research, then, takes as a starting point the need for learners to possess the necessary language learning strategy use in order for them to make best use of the rich language learning opportunities presented by language tandem encounters.

Background to the Research

This action research was conducted with visiting undergraduate Study Abroad students studying on an English language and culture module at a UK university. An extra-curricular language tandem pairing system, introduced by the university's Language Centre, was gaining popularity with these students but there was little evidence of effective language learning strategy use in the learners' reflective journal accounts of their tandem encounters. Moreover, the students, whilst often positive in their evaluations of the social dimension of these encounters, frequently indicated frustration that their tandems did not meet their learning needs and preferences despite the potential for such alignment. In order to address this perceived lack of learner agency to shape the language tandems to their requirements, language tandem strategy instruction was introduced within the taught module. For the research, language learning strategies are understood as 'purposeful mental actions […] used by a learner to regulate his or her second or foreign language (L2) learning' (Oxford 2018: 81).

Methodology

The intervention

The strategy instruction, designed with the aim of developing students' ability to manage their language tandems to meet their language learning objectives, was adapted

from Oxford's generic strategy instruction model (2011: 180). The five stages of the strategy instruction were as follows:

Stage one: Identification of language learning needs and objectives

In the classroom, learners self-identify detailed personal language learning objectives. Explaining their choices in groups aims to develop their skills in communicating these objectives to others.

Stage two: Awareness of tandem strategies

Learners are introduced to a range of language learning strategies and corresponding possible tandem activities by the teacher. (An example would be the language learning strategy of receiving corrective feedback from a tandem partner on spoken language enacted in an activity in which the tandem partners in turn speak for 5 minutes on a chosen topic and then receive written corrections from their tandem partner.) In groups, the learners then brainstorm their own suggestions for strategy-based activities, which are collated and shared in plenary.

Stage three: Modelling of strategies

Learners observe the teacher explaining and modelling a series of strategy-based language learning activities. In turn, the learners then each model a different strategy-based activity with the teacher playing the role of language tandem partner.

Stage four: Strategy trialling

In their out-of-class tandem, the learners are required to trial three strategy-based language tandem activities related to their personal language learning objectives. They audio-record the session where permission has been granted.

Stage five: Reflection

The learners reflect on their audio-recorded language tandem experiences in reflective journal entries with separate sections on tandem management and on the specific strategy-based activities introduced. Students then feed back their experiences and reflections in subsequent classroom-based group work.

The intervention sought to develop the learners' ability to determine language objectives, to select appropriate tandem language learning strategies and, subsequently, to evaluate their strategy use in the tandem encounter. Although the strategy instruction introduced and modelled a range of specific strategy-based tandem activities, it explicitly framed these modelled strategies as *options* whose usefulness to the individual learner was to be reflected on prior to and following their adoption. The stipulated requirement that learners submit reflective journal entries explaining and evaluating their choices sought to formalise such reflection, as did learners' classroom-based sharing of their tandem learning experiences with their peers.

Research questions

There were three research questions for the study:

1. To what extent did learners feel better able to shape their language tandems to meet their learning needs as a result of the intervention?
2. To what extent did learners feel more satisfied with their language tandem learning as a result of the intervention?
3. To what extent did learners feel more familiar with a range of strategy-based language tandem activities as a result of the intervention?

Research sample and instruments

There were 32 participants, all of whom were Study Abroad students enrolled on an undergraduate English language and culture module. The students' L1 included Spanish, Japanese, German and Chinese. Most of the students were in the CEFR B1 band of English language proficiency with approximately 20% in the B2 band. Only two of the sample had previous language tandem experience and in both cases this experience was reported as being relatively limited. It was a course requirement that all learners independently arrange a language tandem with an expert English user partner external to the taught module at the beginning of the semester. This could be done through the tandem pairing system operated by the Language Centre or through the learner's own networks. The participants' tandem partners did not receive strategy instruction.

With the informed consent of their language tandem partners, the research participants audio-recorded an initial language exchange encounter at the beginning of the academic semester prior to the strategy instruction. They then produced an account of this language tandem encounter in reflective journal entries structured to include reflections on their tandem management and any specific language learning strategies they introduced. Following the strategy instruction, the learners audio-recorded a second language tandem encounter and produced a corresponding second journal entry. For both reflective accounts, the audio recordings provided a means by which the participants would be better able to recall, analyse and reflect upon the language tandem encounters which had taken place. Statements corresponding directly to the three research questions were also repeated in each of the two reflective journal entries (i.e. before and after the strategy instruction intervention) for the participants to rate according to the Likert scale. The findings from the reflective journal data for the 32 students (S1-S32) are provided below.

Findings

Ability to shape the language tandem

In response to the statement 'I feel able to shape the language tandem to meet my learning needs', the 32 participants indicated the following:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Pre-instruction	6	14	10	2	0
Post-instruction	0	0	2	12	18

Table 1

Table one indicates the high degree to which learners initially felt unable to create tandems appropriate to their learning needs. It can be seen that students' self-reported ability then increased very significantly following the strategy intervention with the majority of learners indicating they felt able to shape their tandems effectively.

A prominent theme in the students' reflective journal comments was that they felt they were clearer about their specific learning needs and that this encouraged them to plan their language tandems in advance and work towards specific objectives. As one student put it:

> Having a clear idea about what I wanted to learn before the tandem was a big difference for me. Like before I just thought about 'better speaking' and now I'm thinking about activities for pronunciation and increasing vocabulary. Writing down our goals and talking about it in the class helped me to plan what to do next (S11)

Learners' perceived increased ability to shape their language tandems to meet such objectives can be seen in the example of one student in the journal extract below:

> It was nice to meet but I think [my language partner and I] both felt a bit lost about what we should be doing to make it more constructive and neither of us wanted to say anything about it at first […] When I introduced the strategies that we talked about in the class, they worked well and we could see concrete results that we were looking for (S19)

This sense of their ability to meet learning objectives was often accompanied by learners' increased recognition of their own responsibility for the success of the tandem:

> I realised in the class that I need to be more active to form the tandem. Now I see there are many possibilities and it depends on me to decide what we do so that I'm satisfied with my progress (S8)

Furthermore, although it was a requirement that learners trial strategy-based activities as part of the strategy intervention, many of them commented that they then felt able to continue to shape their tandems independently, as in the following example:

> It helped me to have some tasks to do the first time in order to make us introduce them and it gave me confidence to do it but I wouldn't need that excuse again as it felt normal once I'd done it with a couple of the activities (S5)

Satisfaction with language tandem learning

For the second statement, 'I feel satisfied with my language tandem learning', the participants' responses were the following:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Pre-instruction	5	8	11	5	3
Post-instruction	0	1	1	19	11

Table 2

The data in Table two are significant not only in that they indicate a substantial increase in satisfaction with tandem learning following the intervention but also in the clear indication they provide of the overall dissatisfaction participants had initially experienced.

Overall, a very substantial proportion of the learners felt that they had achieved a more satisfying degree of learning as a result of the intervention. Some also related this satisfaction to tandem longevity as in the following example:

> I learn a lot with her [my language partner] and I am very motivated
> [...] we do a lot more in the time and not just chatting. I think we're
> both more satisfied now and it will probably continue longer because
> we look forward to it (S18)

Significantly, a number of students noted that they had initially held reservations about focusing on learning outcomes since they felt the social dimension of the tandem might suffer. These fears appeared to be unfounded, however. As one learner put it:

> When we were asked to do this, I thought it might change the
> relationship and make it too serious but we enjoyed inventing
> activities together and we still laughed a lot. My partner liked it and
> told me she will do something like this in another exchange (S23)

Indeed, for many learners, as in the following example, the intervention resulted in an intrinsically interesting process of their working together constructively with their tandem partner and introducing strategy-based activities:

> I see my partner now has lots of suggestions for new things we can do
> in the session. It's good because we're both really enthusiastic now
> about finding activities that we want to do and experimenting with
> them together (S18)

The data also suggested that listening to the audio data of the tandems and writing journal entries had facilitated a level of reflection that strengthened learner understanding of the positive changes resulting from their language learning strategies.

> Writing in our journal helped me to understand my tandem. When I
> listened to the first recording, it was the same conversations I have
> with my housemates so I didn't really learn anything. When I listened
> to the second recording, I could really see the big difference and it
> makes me want to continue taking advantage and introduce changes
> like that (S7)

Learner knowledge of strategy-based activities

In response to the statement 'I am familiar with a range of tandem activities and their aims', the participants answered as follows:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Pre-instruction	2	13	10	6	1
Post-instruction	0	0	1	17	14

Table 3

The data in Table three indicate that only a minority of the learners were initially familiar with a range of tandem activities and their purpose. Following the strategy instruction, however, all but one of the students reported such familiarity.

Examples of language learning strategies that learners recorded in their reflective journals as having been successfully introduced from the strategy instruction session included the following:

a) Receiving tandem partner feedback to develop pronunciation of specific sounds
b) Delivering an uninterrupted long turn to the tandem partner for fluency development
c) Brainstorming a lexical field with the tandem partner for vocabulary development
d) Translating a text into the target language with tandem partner support to develop language control

The strategy instruction also appeared to enable the learners to introduce alternative strategy-based activities to those presented by the instructor. An example can be seen in the following extract:

> In class, with my group I invented lots of activities naturally. In my tandem, I wanted to be able to hear the difference between some words where the sounds are very similar to help my listening. I took the Ship or Sheep [pronunciation] book from the self-access and my partner read from the word lists so I told her which word I heard (S19)

Moreover, there was ample evidence of learners increasing their repertoire of strategy-based activities as a result of reflection on their own learner preferences:

> We asked each other to try saying something the most correctly we could (like short sentences) and the other has to make notes about mistakes and then say how many mistakes there were, so the speaker has to find where she was wrong [...] Originally, I asked my partner to correct me and she did but there were some times when I actually just wanted to talk without interruption. Also, I realised writing my first reflective task that I knew a lot of the mistakes and if I can identify the mistakes myself, it helps me to remember to avoid them in the future (S12)

The activity modelling undertaken and observed by the learners in the strategy instruction session also appeared to better enable learners to understand and in turn be able to explain strategy-based activities to their tandem partners.

> We had to explain the activities to the teacher in the class and we watched the other students doing it. There were lots of activities and I could easily understand what each activity was for. Afterwards, I felt it was easy and natural to do the same thing in the tandem (S21)

Discussion

Overall, the findings indicate the significant impact of and positive learner response to the strategy instruction; the learners developed a stronger awareness of their personal responsibility in shaping the language tandem event and felt more confident in tandem management. This learner assumption of responsibility for interacting with and creating learning contexts is central to sociocultural understandings of language learning (Van Lier 2008) and as such is reflected in CEFR goals of 'learning to learn' and 'the use of learning strategies' (Little and Erickson 2015). Although a small number of participants (3/32) initially expressed reservations at actualising their enhanced capacity to act (Ahearn 2001), the findings indicate that this exercising of agency can normalise as learners and their tandem partners (re)formulate their expectations of the language tandems. The strategy instruction therefore serves to socialise learners into autonomous learning as an active, engaged process. Moreover, the students' development often included the increased capacity and the necessary agency to facilitate their tandem partners' own strategy development. Such an outcome promotes the tandem tenet of reciprocity in addition to shared learner responsibility for management of the tandem event.

The participants reported high levels of satisfaction at better meeting their self-defined language learning objectives. Through improved strategy use, students become better learners, which provides an explanation for the increased feelings of engagement which the participants reported. The central role played by motivation in language learning (Ushioda 2008) also underscores the significance of such affective dimensions of the language tandem experience. Indeed, language learning is increasingly viewed as being 'almost entirely dependent upon an individual's active endeavour to increase his/her L2 knowledge and skills' (Ahn 2016: 165). The intrinsic motivation reported by learners as they responded to the structured experimentation, then, has strong implications for student learning post-intervention.

The design principles of the strategy instruction appeared to contribute directly to its positive impact. Firstly, students noted that stage one resulted in an increased ability to set meaningful, specific and achievable targets. The subsequent meeting of these targets contributed to learners' strong sense of progress, which is a potentially powerful motivating factor (Ushioda op cit.). The generation of strategy-based tandem activities in stage two and the opportunity for rehearsal and repeated observation of strategy modelling by the teacher and other learners in stage three also served to create positive associations with tandem management. This in turn has the potential to reduce any affective resistance to strategy introduction (Dickinson op cit.) and consequently significantly increases the likelihood of language learning strategies being employed in authentic contexts.

Learners increased their awareness of a range of strategy-based activities as a result of the strategy instruction but the process appeared to transcend replication of these activities and to redefine learners' understanding of their ability to shape the tandem (see Ahn op cit. on 'agency'). The substantial evidence of learners creating new activities according to their preferences and modifying given ones indicates a notable degree of learner autonomy. Learners appeared to take ownership of the language tandem process once, following strategy modelling, they had become confident in their understanding of the range of activities and the strategies underlying them.

The strategy trialling in stage four provided a context within which the learners could introduce innovations in their language tandems and develop their tandem management. The importance of the learner development in this area is highlighted by Calvert in his insistence that learners 'must articulate their needs and be clear about how they might derive the maximum benefit from the tandem experience' (op cit.: 57). Students' experience of actively selecting, introducing and evaluating specific strategy-based activities resulted in their becoming significantly more aware of both their role and their skills in shaping the tandem experience. This skills development in an authentic learning situation indicates the value of an experiential dimension to the strategy instruction.

Students reported very positively on the process of formal reflection on their language tandem encounters. The use of reflective journals in stage five offered an opportunity for them to (re)explore their tandem encounters and determine, in a systematic and detailed manner, how best these encounters could be managed to meet their own needs and preferences. The group-based 'talk about learning' (Esch 2013) contributed to this goal of learner reflection as learners articulated their tandem experiences to their peers. Such reflection, once established, has the potential to encourage an ongoing process of planning, experimentation and evaluation required for continued effective tandem language development to take place. As learners' needs inevitably evolve over the course of the tandem and, indeed, through the full duration of a learners' relationship with a foreign language, engaging learners in such a reflective cycle is a primary goal of the strategy instruction.

<u>Conclusion</u>

The non-directed language tandem is created by the learners themselves based on their understandings of tandem conventions, the degree to which they have explicit language learning expectations of the tandem and the degree to which they have the skills and agency to negotiate appropriate strategy-based language learning activities. This small-scale research suggests that where students do not already have strong language tandem strategy use, it can be successfully developed through tandem strategy instruction incorporating objective-setting, strategy awareness, modelling, trialling and reflection. As institutions continue to recognise the value of facilitating and encouraging language learning beyond the classroom, this practically-oriented strategy instruction research has strong implications for enhancing students' ability to benefit from the rich learning environment that tandems offer.

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