

E-Tandem Learning and Autonomous Learning: Learners' Perceptions of Benefits and Challenges

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Abstract

Higher education institutions are increasingly adopting innovative and technology enhanced classroom models to foster more autonomous learning environments. Due to its emphasis on developing learner autonomy, tandem and e-tandem learning have been gaining significant attention and popularity, driven by the growing use of technology in classrooms and virtual learning platforms. E-tandem learning, an extension of tandem learning, utilizes telecommunication tools to facilitate language exchange. Despite the rising popularity of this pedagogical approach to encourage learner autonomy, research on learners' perceptions of e-tandem learning remains limited.

The e-tandem program in this study is designed to provide extra-curricular speaking practice opportunities for Chinese learners and English learners at an English-Medium Instruction (EMI) university. This research aims to explore participants' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of their e-tandem learning experiences, utilizing a popular online platform. The findings are expected to inform educators in facilitating and implementing e-tandem learning programs effectively, thereby fostering learner autonomy and ensuring successful learning outcomes.

Two e-tandem programs were conducted, lasting seven and four weeks, respectively. Semi-structured individual interviews were performed to identify the beneficial and challenging factors perceived by six participants. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the recorded text. The research focused on four aspects of the e-tandem program to which students were predominantly exposed: content, partner, teacher, and timing. While some findings align with existing literature, a substantial number of new insights

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have also been identified, necessitating essential considerations for educators in the design and implementation of effective e-tandem programs. This presentation will be of interest to language teachers seeking to explore the use of bilingual e-tandem programs and to promote autonomous learning among students.

Keywords: E-tandem, Learner autonomy, Learner perception, Language exchange, Teletandem learning

Introduction

With the globalization of educational institutions, accelerated by advancements in technology and the prevalence of online education during the COVID era, the traditional form of tandem learning has rapidly transformed into e-tandem learning, utilizing various online tools. Given the increasing adoption of e-tandem learning as a pedagogical tool that promotes learner autonomy in the post-pandemic educational landscape, research on learner perceptions/perspectives is limited (Xu, 2019; El-Hariri, 2016; Tian & Wang, 2010).

Tandem learning refers to language exchange between native or competent partners, both acting as a learner and a tutor, aiming to improve the target language proficiency based on the principles of reciprocity and learner autonomy (Vassallo & Telles, 2006; Schwienhorst, 2003; Ushioda, 2000). E-tandem learning extends this concept by utilizing email, video conferencing, and online platforms.

The benefits of tandem/e-tandem learning include improved pronunciation, vocabulary building and increased speaking proficiency, and willingness to take risks with language in the classroom (Shaver, 2012); developing intercultural competence (Lewis & Qian, 2021; Xu, 2019); enjoyment of personal interaction with a native speaker and access to informal everyday target language (Ushioda, 2000); fostering learner autonomy (Alvarado et al., 2023; Ushioda, 2000).

A small body of studies has reported on the challenges of tandem/e-tandem learning. Ryan (2014) notes that the absence of a curriculum and differences in learners' competency levels, interests and goals could pose challenges for them in directing learning process and measuring language acquisition. Logistical hurdles, such as internet connectivity and different time zones (Lewis & Qian, 2021; Hung et al., 2013) are also identified. Despite numerous studies on the benefits of tandem learning, the challenges remain underexplored, indicating a need for more comprehensive research in this field.

Considering the lack of research on learners' perceptions of tandem/e-tandem and particularly regarding the potential challenges, there is a pressing need for further investigation. This study aims to explore learners' perceptions of benefits and challenges in their experiences with e-tandem learning utilizing a popular online platform. The research questions are:

- What factors do learners find beneficial and motivating to sustain engagement in the e-tandem program as autonomous learners?
- What factors do they find difficult or challenging and in need of improvement?

To address the research questions, the current research investigates the learners' experiences in learning content, teacher, partner and timing that the learners are mainly exposed to in their e-tandem learning.

Methods

In the e-tandem program, international students (native English speakers/those educated in English Medium Instruction settings) who are beginners in Chinese were paired with Chinese counterparts studying at an EMI institution in China to exchange Chinese and English languages. The Chinese students have intermediate English proficiency levels. Participants arranged e-tandem sessions on an online meeting platform, once or twice weekly, utilizing video/audio, screen sharing, doodling, and chat boxes for e-tandem learning. Learners received weekly task sheets designed by the researcher to review vocabulary and grammatical structures before engaging in free-form conversation. Furthermore, outside regular sessions, participants occasionally met on WeChat for additional communication. A semi-structured interview lasting 60–70 minutes was conducted with each of the six individual interviewees out of 20 participants. Thematic analysis was employed to examine the recorded text.

Results

The primary goal of this research is to explore how participants perceive the benefits and challenges of an e-tandem program. This section categorizes the data into four distinct themes for systematic analysis.

Content

Interviewees reported that discussing practical topics such as “haircut” and “seeing a doctor” beneficial, as those topics facilitated authentic language use

including idioms/slangs, and cultural exchange. For instance, conversations about the tradition of avoiding haircut in February in China provided valuable cultural insights. They also appreciated the material design, particularly the clear structure of provided worksheets, which helped them initiate conversations. However, three interviewees encountered difficulties engaging with non-personalized topics that did not align with their interests and needs.

Partner

Participants appreciated interactions with native speakers and valued their prompt feedback during sessions. Beneficial personality traits identified in partners included friendliness, patience, a positive attitude, and empathy, all of which effectively supported their partners. One participant expressed satisfaction with the numerous suggestions received on improving listening skills.

However, challenges were reported regarding differing learning preferences leading to disagreements between partners, as well as varied levels of commitment and feedback/correction due to the partners' personality traits and attitudes.

Teacher

Participants appreciated the absence of teacher involvement during the sessions, as they felt more relaxed about making mistakes. They also found teacher support beneficial, such as occasional progress checks beyond the regular sessions and the provision of learning materials. Conversely, a concern was raised regarding the absence of the teacher during sessions when learners needed support for pronunciation correction and further explanations, especially when attempting to convey complex concepts in the target language to their partners.

Timing

Timing refers to the duration and frequency of sessions. Participants appreciated the flexibility of meeting times, which allowed them to schedule sessions according to their preferences. They also valued the possibility to extend communication beyond regular sessions. Nevertheless, they find the duration of the e-tandem program challenging because it is not long enough to achieve their aimed language levels.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings show that e-tandem learning is perceived as a positive learning tool that can develop learners' autonomy. One new finding indicates that while some learners do not want in-session teacher intervention, others appreciate

teacher support for language development and regular progress checks. This suggests that teachers need to carefully balance timely in-session intervention with allowing sufficient space for learners to develop autonomy in their learning. Another finding on varying learning preferences, interests, and needs suggests that individual differences in learning should be given more consideration. This approach would likely enhance learners' motivation to learn autonomously. This could manifest in the form of an online forum platform such as Padlet, where learners can display their preferred topics, ways of learning, and previous learning experiences with the target language, and negotiate learning opportunities with potential partners. This method can mitigate the challenges identified in the findings related to partner personality issues by providing opportunities for learners to find ideal partners through negotiation and discussion on the platform.

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