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Enough of puns. They serve to attract the readers's attention but are no substitute for good ideas and hard facts. This article is about 'tandem' courses and the value that such an approach can have at a variety of levels and in a number of contexts. It is an approach with a long history, well researched and of proven value. Intensive language experiences don't come cheap and I hope to convince the reader that the tandem approach can benefit all language learners from relatively inexperienced pupils to advanced learners and users like ourselves.

Last September I spent a week observing 80 Erasmus students from Oviedo and Bochum who were engaged on a month's tandem course in Spain. Although later in the article I will deal specifically with this course and my observations it is interesting to try to seek possible applications with any level of language learning where tandem is possible.

Where does the 'tandem' idea come from?

Few people will be aware, I certainly wasn't before last summer, that tandem courses have a long history and are well established in most European countries. According to TANDEM @: An introduction', a useful guide to the organisation, the origins go back to the early 1800's when a number of initiatives in England, such as the 'mutual system' for school children in Manchester, were developed. In 1968 French-German youth exchanges applied the method and developed material. This, in turn, inspired an initiative involving German-Turkish working with immigrants in Germany. In 1979 Jürgen Wolff developed the procedures for organising individual Spanish-German Tandem partnerships in Madrid. This became the basis of the current Tandem network which has members in a number of countries worldwide and network links with adult education centres, universities and Goethe Institutes.

What is 'tandem'?

It is based on the simple principle 'You help me learn, I help you learn, and we learn to understand each other better'. It offers the opportunity for learners to study the language and culture of another language with native speakers of that language to mutual advantage. Tandem courses vary according to the individual needs and environment but, broadly speaking, there are three approaches:

- A. Directed learning: communicative language teaching by a native speaker teacher in a classroom situation;
- B. Autonomous learning: extracurricular learning 'in tandem'. There are two variations:
 - (a) free conversation tending to promote non-directional language acquisition and
 - (b) directed learning through alternating the role of teacher and student;
- C. Intercultural learning: which can be introduced through directed learning, autonomous and binational (bicultural) learning. This last option involves a bilingual teaching team providing the framework for topics and activities of the students working in pairs or in groups. Sometimes these sessions are preceded by a mononational phase where grammar and subject matter can be prepared. This is particularly valuable for less experienced learners.

These three approaches are in practice blended to suit the needs of the learners and in the Oviedo course it is possible to pick out all three in modified form.

The emphasis of this approach is underlined in the 92 *Kurs Programme Tandem* for Spanish students:

'Estas opciones didácticas y organizativas responden a un

modelo de enseñanza verdaderamente intercultural. Dejando atrás los métodos tradicionales caracterizados por el papel central del profesor/a y de la gramática, así como por un continuo recurso a la simulación de situaciones estereotipadas, tratamos de otorgar más importancia a la cultura y su lengua.'

'These teaching and organisational options meet the needs of a truly intercultural model of teaching. It is a departure from the traditional methods characterized by the central role of the teacher and grammar as well as by the constant recourse to simulations of stereotypical situations, we attempt to attach more importance to the culture and the language.'

Genuine personal communication is central to the approach.

How does it work in practice?

The tandem course I observed is a joint venture between the Ruhr-Universität Bochum and the Universidad de Oviedo (and hopefully in the future Sheffield University). Bochum, Oviedo and Sheffield are twinned and these courses will increase subject to Erasmus funding.

80 students spent a month in Oviedo in September. A similar three-week course takes place in Bochum in July. Two levels of ability were catered for in each language (superior y medio/Oberstufe und Mittelstufe). Students admitted on the curso medio had spent up to a year learning the other language and students who had spent longer than a year attended the nivel superior courses. The courses were not restricted to students studying German/Spanish. One German student casually reading a 'Manual de ginecología' was just one example of doctors and engineers who were taking part. Likewise, many of them were not considering teaching as a career. There were three lecturers, two German and one Spanish. One was instrumental in setting up the tandem course in 1984¹ and the other two had progressed from being themselves students on the programme. The lecturers were supported by 'tutores', four for each language. They assisted the lecturers when the students were working in mononational groups.

The students worked for three hours a day with additional time spent on preparation and some written homework reinforcement. 90 minutes a day were spent on 'tandem' activities (with students working in binational pairs) and there was 30 minutes tutor time when work developed during previous tandem sessions was developed in mononational groups. The outcome - a playlet, discussion - was prepared by small groups of six or seven assisted by tutors. The remaining hour was taken up with presentation and formal grammar and pronunciation practice in mononational sessions.

On Fridays and occasionally on Wednesdays there were plenary sessions featuring discussions and what were called 'concursos de teorías', see below. During these sessions equal weight was given to each language and, interestingly, the students could opt to express themselves in either language. In the debates two or three 'experts' (who had prepared a topic) were questioned by three interviewers with contributions from the floor. All participants were expected to take their turns on the platform at some stage during the course. As for the 'concursos de teorías' small groups of four or six students developed a theory to present to the plenary. Originality and humour were encouraged. An example of this kind of activity is as follows:

¿Por qué no se ven HORREOS en los alrededores de Bochum?
Warum sieht man in der Gegend von Bochum keine HORREOS?

Why don't you come across HORREOS (typical Asturian grain stores on stilts) around Bochum?

The material was all prepared, printed and bound in

Germany. It comprised a series of activities in both languages; the first half of the book was written in German for the Spanish students and the second the reverse of the first. The purpose of producing the material in both languages was to clarify each partner's task, enhance comprehension and, provide authentic stimulus material in both languages. The activities, developed and refined over 7/8 years were free standing and thus the order of presentation was not dictated by the book. The material was intended to be extremely challenging, lively and to offer possibilities for activities which would be difficult to embark upon in a normal course. In fact, the activities were designed to be too difficult to do without help from their partners. An example of this was 'Refranes' where the students were required to produce a chain of sayings in alternate languages each one linked to the last by meaning or individual words. The task was difficult and some students had difficulty finding examples in their own language. In one case a student could only remember half a saying in his own language and, since his neighbours could not help, he felt the need to call out to the whole group for assistance.

Access to the local culture was exploited in the tasks which often relied on reactions to, and curiosity about, the local culture and region. 'Menudencias sorprendentes' (Surprising features of daily life) was designed to encourage recently arrived German students to pick out the differences between daily life in Germany and Spain.

The material was extremely varied ranging from poetry to newspaper articles to creative writing.

For the purpose of this article the focus is centred on the tandem elements of the course although, when interviewed, many students were quick to underline the complementary nature of each element of the course and the necessity of each to ensure progress. One student, for example, identified his own oral proficiency and the possibilities that the tandem element offered him as being of most importance but stated the need for greater grammatical accuracy in order to make the progress he wanted to make. Nevertheless, there were others calling for less grammar and more time devoted to tandem activities. The general consensus was that the tandem element was the most enjoyable part of the course.

The key questions I set out to answer were as follows:

- How were the sessions set up?
- What are the key factors for ensuring success?
- What are the problems and how are they tackled?
- What are the main benefits?

Setting up the activities

The groups of about forty *curso medio* or *curso superior* students normally worked in pairs, or threes in the event of absence. The activities were introduced with little explanation other than the page reference and the occasional word of clarification. The teacher's role was limited to ensuring that all the students were paired and understood the task. The students were therefore free to interpret the tasks as they wished. Some appeared to recognise that the stimulus material was precisely that and were prepared, for example, to allow a discussion to develop at a tangent or even change the task (c.f. Appendix). The strategies that the students employed were in themselves of interest. They ranged from a conscious effort to define the nature and scope of the task in advance to an unreflective adherence to the task. All the students were confident that they were learning and adopted a number of different ways that would provide a fascinating study to a psycho-linguist. In some cases the Germans always spoke Spanish and vice versa; in other cases time limits were imposed on use of one language; in others the language changed from minute to minute and from speaker to speaker. In all cases the students exhibited a facility for changing languages although some admitted that they had yet to progress beyond the stage of translating, i.e. they were not using the language automatically. There were examples of subtle changes of language use. In some cases if there were three people working together the dominant language would be the one of which there were two native speakers. At times the presence of a non-speaker of one of the languages caused a sensitive shift to a common vehicular language. The other shift of language occurred when the students became excitable and reverted to

their own language – would that all language lessons aroused such emotion!

Factors for ensuring success

In terms of key factors it is easy to identify the reciprocal nature of the style of working. The students articulated clearly the need for responsibility for each others' learning. In practical terms this meant correcting one another's mistakes, ensuring fair language use, stopping their partners taking short cuts, identifying recurring pronunciation problems in their partners and generally supporting their partners.

Linked to this was the extent to which the *padrino/madrina* (godfather/godmother) relationship worked. Neither staff nor students could identify cases of pairings which had not worked. The partners were decided by lot every week which, apart from giving the students the opportunity to get used to a range of voices, accents, approaches and the opportunity of increasing the number of friends, also meant that the students would not be 'stuck' with an incompatible partner for a month. Although new pairings were the norm, compatible pairings could be continued. Another important factor to note is that it was considered essential for the students to have a certain level of language to be able to operate successfully.

The support material provided by the handbook and supplementary material has to be varied, stimulating and different from what the students are used to doing. There is a uniqueness about the work which is supported by imaginative and challenging material of all kinds. When asked about the material the students did have preferences for one activity over others but were quick to point out that if one activity did not work as well as another it could just as well have been their mood or the day or their individual preference and not the activity itself at fault.

What problems were there and how were they resolved?

Having looked at some important factors contributing towards success it is appropriate to look at potential or actual problems that might arise during the tandem sessions.

Two related problems that apply to all pairwork to different degrees are a tolerance of error and a consequent failure to correct when the message is understood. To some extent one can argue that 'skillful neglect', namely a failure to interrupt the flow of the conversation by correcting, is in itself an important factor in instilling confidence and maintaining the level of interest and involvement that can be lost if the emphasis of form over content is exaggerated by too much interference. In practice the students appeared to be aware of the potential problems and to deal sensitively with their partner's errors. They all showed an awareness of their responsibilities and, in practice, were very demanding. One student interviewed identified a difference between work in the classroom and contact outside. She said that she tended not to correct as much outside the classroom but would correct where appropriate in class. This is significant since many of us have suffered the generous tolerance of native speakers who have failed to correct us and allowed us to continue to commit errors. The tandem situation makes clear the roles and responsibilities which ensure a measure of correction.

Another potential problem is the role of the native speaker. There is a temptation for native speakers to mistake their competence in their own language for knowledge of it. A recent case of a Spanish native speaker interviewee applying for a place on the Sheffield PGCE course who described 'gustar' as a reflexive verb is a telling example. I did observe students, with mixed success, giving sometimes lengthy grammatical explanations but the teachers discouraged such explanations and felt that they could do more harm than good and that it was inappropriate for the students to attempt such explanations.

This hints at a further problem of the mistaken notion that each participant fulfils the role of teacher to his/her partner. One of the course organisers stressed that it was important for this not to happen. He added that these students, for the most part young learners with no teaching experience, were not equipped to teach. The relationship was not teacher-pupil and the native