

Principles of tandem language learning

Brammerts, H. (2002). « Apprendre en tandem : principes et objectifs ». In Helmling, B. (Dir.). *L'apprentissage autonome des langues en tandem*. Paris : Editions Didier (Essais).

The following extract is not an official translation.

Principle of reciprocity

Learning in tandem relies on exchange: partners want to take on the other's knowledge or skills. To this end, they each bring, on the one hand, abilities and skills the other wants to acquire and, on the other hand, the willingness to support the other in his/her learning.

This partnership learning clearly differs from other learning contexts that benefit only one of the people involved. Thus, tandem partnerships differ not only from the teacher-pupil relationship, but also from the relationship with a native speaker who is not learning the native language of the other person (as in the case of a stay abroad): in this case, one cannot expect the same willingness and the same ability to support the learning of the non-native speaker as one can expect from the tandem partner.

Tandem learning requires following the same ground rules as any other type of partnership, whether private or professional: it can only be sustainable if partners can benefit from it (if possible equally).

The necessity to help the other to achieve his/her own objectives does not fall under moral or pedagogical standards in the first place: this support represents rather the *sine qua non* for requesting the partner's support. The principle of reciprocity makes tandem an affordable learning solution that can be used in spite of cultural differences and that requires and develops the capacity for collaboration.

However, mutual commitment and personal benefit are variables that are hard to quantify and necessarily subject to subjective interpretation. That is why, in practice, insisting on the time variable – half the time for me, half for the partner - rather than on the quality of the commitment turned out to be useful. During face-to-face tandem, half of the meetings are dedicated to each partner. In this half they work primarily in the target language and according to the needs of the learning partner. In e-mail tandem learning, the following rule is usually applied: the time needed to read and write each message is divided by two. In the half dedicated to the partner one speaks in one's own mother tongue (thus providing the input the partner needs) and provides the partner with the help and information he requested. One uses the other half for his/her own purposes: work on the text, corrections and information from the partner and, above all, one expresses oneself in the foreign language.

Each partner brings his/her abilities and skills without seeking to claim qualifications he/she does not have. Generally speaking, communicative skills, the confidence with which one acts in one's own cultural context, the knowledge of one's environment etc. are more developed than those of the partner, but there are individual differences in this area. The learner is the one (principle of autonomy) who should know how to take advantage of the other's qualifications and who should find the appropriate partner when it comes to achieving more specific objectives such as writing academic texts or communicating in a particular field.

However, learners can expect their partner to make maximum use of the skills they have. Thus, they both have to use their mother tongue effectively and carefully as the partner will be learning from their model. They need to be sure that their partner will give them information honestly, admit to any uncertainties and present his/her opinion and personal experiences as such.

Each of them supports his/her partner in his/her learning, i.e., according to his/her abilities, each one provides the help requested: both correct, make suggestions for wording, help the other to understand texts, translate, explain, etc. – always when and how the partner wishes (principle of autonomy).

Thus, tandem partners never teach, they help their partner to learn. This principle even applies in the case of partners who have acquired, as teachers for example, the ability to select objectives, progressions, methods, exercises etc. for certain group of learners, to describe learning objects (e.g. a foreign language), to evaluate progress, etc. Those who impose on their partner support that the latter does not want to receive are generally not appreciated.

A good tandem partner, in his/her role as helper, recognises the partner's autonomy to learn and is willing to support it – even though the way the partner proceeds does not correspond to his/her own way of learning, or even if he/she considers it ineffective.

He/she will certainly expect his/her partner to respect his/her own way of learning and to help him/her implement it. However, both can influence each other without infringing on the other's autonomy: each partner can see the other's methods as ideas to be drawn on. When they discuss the different ways in which they can enrich each other and in which they can support each other, they can both benefit from their different approaches.

Major problems arise, nevertheless, when trying to define more precise skills that enable partners to support each other – such as “being able to explain intelligibly”; “being able to explain grammar”, “being able to correct” etc. (cf. Kleppin & Raabe 1999) – or even trying to institutionalise the teaching of such skills. This approach would especially entail the following two risks: on the one hand, it would neglect that tandem learning is individual learning and that it is therefore only possible to define the best way of explaining or correcting on the basis of each learner (their way of thinking, communicating or learning, prior knowledge, objectives etc.). On the other hand, such an approach could lead learners to blame their failures and successes on their partner's skills, which would neglect the fact that they themselves are responsible for their own learning.

In line with the principle of autonomy, it seems more promising to look for ways to help the learner benefit from the skills of his/her partner and to get the partner to provide the help needed.

Principle of autonomy

The principle of autonomy places full responsibility for the learning on the learner. This means they have the obligation but also the possibility to set their own objectives and to think about different ways to achieve them together with their partner who is both a native speaker of the learner's target language and a learner of the learner's mother tongue.

This principle requires the learner to be aware of the various possibilities offered by the context of communication and learning of tandem. They should especially know how to adapt their own needs to the possibilities, the limits and the personal interests of their partner and how to negotiate with them on all the aspects of their joint work; including the frequency and extent of their work, the topics of conversation, the type and extent of mutual support etc.

Combining the principle of autonomy with the principle of reciprocity suggests that tandem partners' specific objectives may be different, and are, in general, actually different. A typical example of divergent objectives in the academic field is that one partner wishes to use their part of the joint work to improve their speaking skills for a trip abroad, whereas the other wants to understand and discuss academic texts. Tandem learning lends itself very well to collaboration between partners with different habits, needs and levels. A beginner learner can be a good partner for an advanced learner as they will have a better command of their own mother tongue than the partner.

Learners take responsibility for their own learning not only in relation to the partner, but also in relation to externally imposed objectives and progression. Obviously, they can focus on objectives, exercises or topics that have been defined in the language class; they can also prepare for a standardised exam with the help of their partner – and possibly even more effectively than in a group, as the work is more individualised. However, every decision must be left to the learners if the aim of such learning is to develop their autonomy. While there are tandem learning courses and activities that try to set small steps and their progression, this approach fails to exploit the most important potential of the tandem learning context, namely the possibility of combining authentic communication with self-directed (individualised) learning.

When teachers organise self-directed tandem learning, this does not mean that they are abandoning responsibility to the learners, but that they are emphasising education for autonomy. In most cases, the increased motivation of learners who thus work independently and voluntarily, and the possibility of using individual methods lead to greater success.

Autonomous learning does not mean learning without professional support. On the contrary: experience so far seems to show that tandem learning is highly successful when learners have learned to use effective strategies and techniques and when their work is accompanied – directly or indirectly- by advisors.

A number of contributions to this volume deal with the different possibilities to encourage and support the learner through individual counselling, sharing of experience between peers, suggestions for tandem work or similar approaches. The aim is to develop an action competence that can be transferred to other learning contexts and thus prepares for lifelong learning.