CHAPTER 3

CASE STUDY OF A TANDEM SESSION I: DESIGN

In this study, several participants were asked to participate in separate tandem sessions (one tandem session per pair). In order to reveal how collaboration and autonomy could be improved, it was expected to take at least three or four sessions to establish cognitive presence. Through continuously improving teaching presence from session to session, a gradual build up of teaching elements (i.e. goal setting, in-session intervention) would result in better collaboration and achievement of goals (i.e. lexical or grammatical improvement) by participants. The main goal of this current study was to establish guidelines in balancing teaching presence according to student needs; guiding instead of hindering learners in becoming autonomous. Too much interference at an early stage would be an example of such a hindrance. Careful observation of how learners would appropriate a minimum of teacher instruction might help future research and also future learners and teachers. When rich enough data to formulate and support such guidelines would have been collected, further sessions would be unnecessary. Also, they would consume too much time and resources if conducted after that point and thus be beyond the scope of this study.

Instruments and data collection

Researcher observation:

Acting as a teacher, the researcher was a full participant in this study in that he gave instructions to the participants, observed and the intention in later sessions was for

him to partake as a teacher during conversations and conduct interviews for feedback after sessions with the participants. Due to limitations in budget and time, no other researcher or research assistant was involved in this study. Due to the nature of this field, there was no existing course available that would be suitable to investigate for these purposes at the time this study was conducted.

Interview:

Students were asked to comment on their experience of their first tandem session; the purpose was mainly to reveal where, according to the participants, weaknesses and strengths of the program and their performance could be found.

Transcript analysis:

The transcript of the conversation that would result from the tandem would be used to identify and quantify the patterns of interaction, concerning negotiation of meaning and collaboration according to the Garrison framework as outlined earlier in chapter 1, in the paragraph titled **"Collaboration and cognitive presence"**.

Voice recorder:

In distance learning, unless web cams are used, there is no eye contact. Since this method would mean that there is no eye contact, no visual cues or other non-verbal communication can be given. Thus, participants have to rely on their verbal linguistic knowledge and abilities to get their ideas across. For session 1: students were placed

back to back, so that they would not be able to see each other while they had their conversation. This conversation was recorded using an MP3 recorder, for the main purpose of transcribing and analyzing the text afterwards. For a full outline of the session procedure, please refer to the Appendix.

The purpose of using a voice recorder

The main purpose for using a voice recorder instead of a pc equipped with a voice chat program was to minimize or perhaps eliminate the technological learning curve, in order to focus on language learning. Yet, at the same time the lack of face-to-face support (such as body language, facial expressions and hand gestures) is still simulated in this manner: conversations usually contain no eye-contact in a traditional distance tandem, unless a webcam is used. Although a headset and pc might be comparable to a phone conversation and thus feel more familiar to students, this way caused less complications for the researcher.

Rationale for using back-to-back seating arrangement

There is a matter of awkwardness or unnaturalness to the 'feeling' of conversing without being able to see one another. There could be different kinds of awkwardness and perhaps different reasons for awkwardness. Awkwardness the participants might experience due to the back-to-back seating arrangement might have occurred because these chat partners did not know each other. This might also be experienced by a tandem pair who is using a medium such as an on-line messenger or voice chat program.

The unfamiliarity in such a first-time meeting would be even greater, since they would not have had the opportunity to meet face to face before commencing, like in the scenario of this current study. In fact, it is quite common in distance tandem language learning situations for students to meet via an on-line service that 'matches' tandem partners, or via a messenger program that can filter its users for location or language used (as indicated by individual users). Another reason for awkwardness could have been the novelty factor. Often, interlocutors make use of non-verbal communication to understand each other, which is not an option in this tandem session. This takes getting used to for it to run as smooth as a phone conversation would, since there is some familiarity with holding a device, and talking to someone who they cannot see. From this perspective, perhaps a voice chat using an appropriate computer program is closer to a phone conversation than sitting back to back. However, there would also be the novelty of software use in such a scenario. Finding out how to install the program, start and end a conversation, 'dialing' a contact etc. can be very time consuming (even when disregarding the learning curve).

Another drawback is that many voice chat programs or messenger programs that offer this functionality only have a half-duplex option. Similar to using a two-way radio or walkie talkie, this would mean that each speaker would have to allow their partner to complete their utterance before they can speak, otherwise they would break the stream of audio received. Programs that do offer full-duplex mode have other concerns, in that the quality is dependent on the speed, quality and consistency of the internet connection. It is mainly the consistency which is an unreliable factor between two non-networked computers that delivers most of the trouble. Weather conditions,

amount of users in the same neighborhood on-line during the chat, the distance to the main server and other unpredictable issues can cause massive interference during a conversation.

Aside from drawbacks, there are also benefits. For example, conducting several 'trial runs' with participants sitting back-to-back and the instructor in the same room can hold various benefits that might be necessary in the initial stages of learner development. Some of these benefits could be: quicker explanations or corrections (perhaps during student nominated time-outs or teacher interventions) as compared to an online text- or voice chat; for students to gain some familiarity with their tandem partner; teaching abstract points while in session; announcing sub-activities. The purpose of creating such a lead in would be to separate teaching technological skills from language skills.

Design of the case study

Instead of conducting a comparative study which only notes differences in outcomes when applying different methods, a gradually changing method is expected to emerge over the course of data collection. Several sessions, albeit increasing in task demands, structure and teaching presence each session, will be conducted with a number of pairs participating in this study. Meanwhilst, the goal will be to analyze the results of each session independently, and evaluating and adapting the teaching approach according to the implications of each session. A mainstay will be the increase in structural complexity of tasks, the number of techniques taught and the guidance and

participation of the teacher in each session. The reason for doing so is to see what kind of differences occur that could be related to the way a task is conducted.

Teaching presence in the case study

Autonomy does not mean we need to exclude teaching presence during interaction either. If we perceive autonomy as a gradual process, then a set of rules which was given before any application might not be as effective as ongoing support while learning is in progress. This could be regarded as a sort of coaching: just like any sports coach would not abandon his team during a match, a teacher does not walk out of the classroom when learners actually start to communicate. Nonetheless, it has been suggested by some that teaching presence in tandem language learning should be kept to a minimum. Gläsmann and Calvert (2001) believe that this would interfere with the autonomy aspect and individual development of learning habits. However, Freiermuth (2002) reports as one of the pedagogical benefits of distance language learning and teaching, the teacher's ability to monitor, refocus, participate in and guide the class unobtrusively.

In the present study, there was no issue of there being any lack of student-to-student interaction, since it is the premise of tandem learning. Here, the role of the on-line teacher, as will be explained later, is different to that of a traditional classroom teacher, regardless of whether CALL is used or not. However, the method discussed in this study was mainly geared toward observing what happened when students were left to their own devices, and how in future sessions better preparation and development could improve these students' performance. So student-to-student interaction was the main event.

Lessons planned for data collection

Initially, there were eight participants selected from two groups of learners at a university in Northern Thailand. Four participants were selected from a group of Thai individuals, who were English learners (EL). Likewise, four foreign, non-Thai individuals were selected from a group of Thai learners (TL). The purpose for this selection was to have one student from each group pair up, to be taught independent of the rest of the group. A different pair would be used each time, so a total of four sessions were planned. It was predicted that a careful reflection on teaching after each session would lead to the development of an increasingly structured approach in teaching, and an increasing focus on task. The increased teaching structure would also mean more strategies were to be taught to students as a preparation for each tandem session. However, there would be enough flexibility in this approach to adapt appropriately to what happened in each session. It was expected that at least four sessions would be necessary to gather data on:

- Evidence of learners creating their own learning opportunities

- Four phases of cognitive presence reached by participants in one session

Progressive steps towards cognitive presence

It was expected to take at least these four sessions before the teaching would be able produce this kind of data. Unfortunately, a continuous development project with a larger group was deemed beyond the limitations of this study. For example, four

sessions with each pair (i.e. 16 sessions) might have yielded a more insightful experience for both teacher/researcher and participants. Because of this limitation, the scope was fixed on generating suggestions for continuous development of teaching. In a more realistic scenario or a more extensive study, the symbiotic relationship between teaching and learning processes could be monitored, evaluated and applied in each of the individual teaching situations, and not separated as in this study.

An important reason of taking this approach was to get some understanding for what a balanced teaching approach would entail. No conclusions about the method can be made, since the results from each pair cannot be reproduced. Pair A would respond differently from pair D to the same approach. The reasoning for a progressive step-by-step approach was also to compare a basic autonomy approach as suggested by Gläsmann and Calvert (2001), meaning to instruct students as little as possible, to an introduction to new strategies, such as the ones suggested by Pawan et al. (2003), see also chapter 2, paragraph 2.3. This would mean that each session would add another strategy from those suggestions (with the first session having no strategies taught, no structured task, and no teacher interference during the tandem session).

- Lesson 1: starts with an explanation of tandem learning and provides participants with topics to choose from
- Lesson 2: contains everything from lesson 1 and teaches students how to correct each other, provides students with a bank of structured tasks to choose from instead of just topics
- Lesson 3: contains everything from lesson 1 and 2. Students are instructed to use self labelling statements

- Lesson 4: contains everything from lesson 1,2 and 3. The tandem session includes teaching presence during the session, as mentioned earlier in this paragraph.

Adapting to circumstances: suiting methods to the participants

As in Kötter's (2003) study, the recommendations found in the introduction of Gläsmann and Calvert (2001) appear to match some of Kötter's suggestions for further research. As Kötter suggests investigating learners who are more closely matched, Gläsmann and Calvert also suggests using an appropriate tandem method for each situation. For example, to decide between e-mail or letter tandems would depend on a learner's resources. Another suggestion that could perhaps be offered besides these two takes might be to say that instead of controlling variables at all costs, any approach would need to be applied dependent on context (in line with Gläsman and Calvert's ideas). Another argument is also in favor of adapting an approach to the needs of the specific context, while moderately controlling variables. This is one reason for this current study focusing on adapting to arising pedagogical needs. Needs of learners change, which means the instruction needs to continuously adapt to suit those needs. Even over the course of a few classes, a clearer picture of the specific needs of any group becomes evident from a sample such as taken in this study.

Context/environment and identity of the participants

Learners who shared a similar learning context were chosen. That is, for each separate target language group (learners of English and learners of Thai) they were from the same group, respectively. The members of the English learner (EL) group were

studying for an international Bachelors program, as were the learners of Thai (TL). The program which the members of the EL group were enrolled in was different in that it was intended for non-native speakers of English, whereas the program TL learners were enrolled in was intended for native speakers of English. Of course there were significant differences between the two groups, but these differences were perhaps greater than those within groups between individuals.

Anticipation of problems due to differing backgrounds and agendas

One difference was that learners from the Thai EL group did not share the same purposes for acquiring their respective target language as the group of TL foreigners, who were native speakers of English intending to improve their Thai language skills. These purposes can be deduced from the difference in setting. For the Thai EL students, their setting was an EFL context in that they were not fully immersed in the language, but studying the language for a specific purpose (to complete an international academic program).

Likewise, the group of TL foreigners also studied the language for a specific purpose, mainly to fulfill academic requirements for their respective international program. Another difference was the urgency the two groups or individuals might have had for language improvement. Both programs are taught in English, so the previously stated need was likely of greater urgency for the Thai EL group than for the foreign TL group. The target language for the Thai EL group was in a way perhaps instrumental in the pursuit of furthering their academic endeavor than for the group of TL foreigners. On the other hand, some of the foreigners indicated a desire to find

employment in Thailand upon completion of their Bachelors program. Thus, their need was also present but less urgent, since they only needed passing grades for Thai language courses. There is less direct application of language skills in their academic program as compared to the Thai group who need to gain as many skills as possible in a short amount of time, in order to apply them in future courses.

Session procedure

The basic outline of each session was as follows (See the appendix for an outline of the lesson plans used in each session): The teacher explained the purpose of tandem learning and how it works, then asked the students if all is understood, and if they have any questions. They are then presented with a bank of possible tasks. As suggested by Gläsmann and Calvert (2001), which could be considered the most conventional method currently used, no instructions or advice is to be given to pupils, or 'to be kept to a minimum to ensure learners adhere to the advice given'. Though aimed at younger learners, other work such as 'A guide to tandem learning via the internet' by Little & Brammerts (1996) also suggests that learners need help and suggestions, but does not provide any information on how to deliver them to tandem learners.

As outlined in chapter 1 (in the paragraph titled 'Language focus') of this study, the process of increasing 'overt teaching of collaborative and learner autonomy skills and strategies' over the course of several sessions had the intention of finding weaknesses and strengths and ultimately a balance in these different approaches. The method applied was intended to change after each session, steadily increasing towards a

structural (or perhaps instructional) approach to observe the impact it may have on the patterns of interaction, the negotiation of meaning and the students' experience of the lesson. The ideal amount of instruction, techniques used, or task requirements will always be context dependant. However, from these different approaches, an appropriate method was to be developed for an appropriate time in future tandem courses. It might add to the bank of teaching tools at the tandem teacher's disposal. Over time, it might add to the conventional guidelines and currently practiced methods of teaching learners how to conduct a language tandem. Also, the teaching perspective was the main focus in this study, so the teaching reflections of each session was to lead to a different implementation of methods than if they were all used for one session. The suggestions made by Pawan et al. (2003) are perhaps too much for a teacher to apply all at once. Even though the students are not the ones being continuously assessed, since each pair was to only perform in one session, the teacher/researcher would have had the opportunity to evaluate which and how different strategies were taught after each session, to make changes accordingly for the next session.

In the end a decision was made to add a little to the basic suggestions made by Gläsmann and Calvert (2001), because the proficiency level was uneven. The aim was to prevent this from being a major factor in the tandem session. For the first session, the basic outline (see appendix A) was used except for the part on error correction, and also lesson plan 1 (appendix B). The partners were given some basic advice on planning ahead for their conversation, by making notes on paper before commencing. The main reason for this was that the participants might be left without anything to say. They were asked if they had any ideas of how to correct each other, but they were

not corrected on their responses, nor were they offered any suggestions. However, the students were told the principles of tandem learning as described in the lesson plan, because it would help them understand what was required of them.

Controlling variables

Kötter (2003) suggested that in future studies learners should be "more closely matched with regard to their target language proficiency, as well as sociocultural factors like their educational background and the format of the courses from which they are recruited," (Kötter, 2003). However, in this current study certain variables are controlled, but only as a means to allow for freedom and flexibility in other areas. First, the degree of control over those variables will be discussed. One might agree with Gläsmann and Calvert (2001) in that needs arise from context. Differences in a real situation will always occur. In this case, the learners' socio-economic backgrounds might have differed more than usual because of the difference in living standards between westerners living in Thailand and local Thai students. This is not to say that there are also Thai students who come from families whose wealth might exceed that of foreign students' families. Furthermore, English is a more widely spoken language worldwide as compared to Thai. As a result, many learners of English have acquired a proficiency which would be difficult to attain without a certain degree of long-term immersion in a language. Most of the participants in the foreigner group came from an international education system in which Thai language had little bearing on their academic progress.

The importance of Thai for these students was perhaps not as great as the importance English holds for Thai students. Perhaps a better description of the situation would be to say that there is an imbalance in language attitude between the two languages. For some people, acquiring English gains higher esteem than acquiring Thai does. For some native English speaking foreigners, proficiency in another language is just as highly regarded. It holds more fruitful prospects, access to information and social mobility to name but few of these. This can also be found in Belz's study (2002), in that the German learners of English had had much more exposure and opportunity to use their respective target language than the American students of English. As reported by the participants, this was regarded as a well-known common factor which was perhaps responsible for the difference in proficiency between learners.

As mentioned before, differences in background affect the interaction between participants. Therefore, this study also aims to look at whether those differences positively affect outcomes. Students were intentionally 'mis-matched', but matched up randomly. For example, participants were not intentionally matched according to language proficiency. This is also due to the circumstances discussed before; there are few LT learners who have the proficiency of LE learners in this specific educational setting. However, if we would know about these differences beforehand, or observe how these differences influence interaction, than this knowledge might also serve as an indicator as to how they might aid future tandem work. For instance, we might purposefully match up students who appear to have an obvious proficiency gap at certain times or intervals over the duration of a tandem course. Other benefits might occur which are not necessarily directly related to language learning, but might aid in the overall pursuit of language learning; developing a rapport between learners,

critical thinking processes, language awareness and as a means for reflection in both learning progress and teaching ability. These issues might surface more clearly when there is a language proficiency gap, because more communication breakdown occurs. Students will have to focus less on the task or topic at hand, and instead try to mend the conversation. This might be beneficial for students at certain stages of a tandem course, perhaps to be alternated as well: besides working with less capable partners they could work with more capable partners and receive other benefits from it. This is mainly to prevent an assymmetrical effect in their overall learning, but due to the constraints of this study the entire scope of what this kind of variation would produce could not be investigated.

Language versus task

Both language and task are important, but language has priority. It should not be sacrificed by either students or teacher for the sake of 'staying on task'. However, the task in this current study was given more weight then in current streams of tandem learning education or classroom integration. That is, it was important to not eliminate the facilitating, monitoring and guiding functions and opportunities a teacher has to steer learners in the right direction. Providing structure was equally essential. The observation made by Pawan et al. (2003) state that without structure and teaching presence, very little production and collaboration occurs. Thus the possibility that learners miss out on learning opportunities rises, perhaps. Granted, that situation was not language learning, but Belz' (2002) study also indicates this: the German students did not have the same degree of urgency (different reasons for participating) or resources (computers per person, time allowed, and internet connections). Kötter

(2003) also leans to this conclusion somewhat similarly as in Belz' study. Besides

cultural awareness, technical and general language skills, learners need to learn how

to become autonomous with guidance. Integrating this into any language course

would also require (continuous) evaluation and thus proper instruction.