

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: GUIDELINES FOR TANDEM LEARNING

Autonomy & Reciprocity; Language & Task

The conclusion of this study is that students need help during the pre-session stage (planning and goal-setting), during the tandem session (monitoring and guiding) and after the session (reflection and evaluation). Yet, students can at times manage these matters by themselves to a certain degree. A teacher's responsibility is to make sure that students receive help when and to judge if they need it. In some situations, the intensity of teaching presence can be less than in other situations. As seen in this current case study, learners can employ collaborative strategies without overt teacher instruction. Thus, cognitive presence is more intuitive in nature than first anticipated at the outset of the case study. In this chapter, suggestions for future use are made for what might be a useful alternative to current tandem learning and teaching practices. How the specific issues discussed in this study need to be investigated further will also be discussed. The decision to change teaching is often made after collecting enough evidence from reflection on teaching. The same of course goes for reflecting on learning, which is perhaps the main purpose of continuous development. However, the autonomous nature of tandem learning requires such a flexible approach not only to prepare learners for the early outset of a tandem course, but to improve the learners' capabilities throughout such a course.

Acknowledgements regarding outcomes

The conversations were likely influenced by the instructor's introduction comments regarding the nature of tandem learning, as being a way to learn the language from, and teach it to each other. Other factors, such as the participants' concept of what language learning entails, could have played a significant role. Regarding the roles students assumed, there seemed to be a sense of authority each participant assumed when fulfilling the part of 'the native speaker'. This role division could develop in the long run, to become one of more equal standing amongst both tandem learners. It seems that especially when the proficiency gap was smaller (in the English conversation), the Thai participant overtly accepted her partner's suggestions (by saying 'Thank you' after each answer), but did not rely on his knowledge alone. For seeking consonance with her prior knowledge, she suggested her own ideas on several occasions. At 6:10 and 6:20 of the conversation, she integrated her own ideas and the ones she gathered through questioning, and applied them to a real-world situation. If she had relied solely on her partner's input, there might not have been any evidence to a resolution in this event. Similarly, T> actively pursued her goals of improving her pronoun and verb use, by stating explicitly that she experienced problems with them, and asking for advice on how to improve the use of these ('To make a correct sentence,' as she seemed to ask). The learners' interpretation of instruction, learner background and attitude and concept of pedagogy described in the examples above demonstrate how teaching presence could have solved problems caused by miscommunication between learners and teacher and learners. Also, teaching presence could have encouraged the learners initiatives and guided them in the right direction.

Intervention regarding the proficiency gap

Reciprocity was attempted by the Thai participant, in that she tried to create an opportunity for her partner to help her with her language problems. She did not receive any feedback on her language use, as she had given in the Thai conversation. One reason, again, could have been the language proficiency gap. As F>'s abilities in Thai were considerably less than T>'s abilities in English, the mistakes she made might not have been as apparent to F> as compared to the opposite situation. The fact that she actively pursued her goals is some indication of reciprocity, albeit manifested indirectly and not consciously intended. Possibly, increasing her partner's awareness of the kind of mistakes she makes, might develop F> into a more useful tandem partner for her. We could speculate that in future sessions, F> would pick up on her mistakes sooner than he would have before, and point them out to her. Again, some overt teaching would perhaps not be of hindrance to the learners. If learners were taught a few strategies on giving metalinguistic feedback, this development might take place sooner than if students were left at their own devices. We must also tell learners to keep in mind that they do not necessarily need to stick to such strict guidelines, but they can be used as a tool at certain times. A flexible approach might yield greater advantages and at the same time develop (through experience) the skill needed to use such tools effectively.

Guiding conversational repair

T> might have tried to discover her partner's background knowledge by giving an example of a common mistake which Thai learners of English make. However,

despite having lived in Thailand for twelve years, it appeared as if F> did not possess as much background knowledge as T> had perhaps assumed. A minor intervention could have solved considerable confusion which lasted for several minutes. One could argue for the benefit learners might draw from resolving this kind of matters independently, yet a certain cut off point could be determined by a teacher to intervene and save a lot of potential frustration. Granted, the participants were steadily heading into the right direction, but the matter remained unresolved.

Even though the American partner missed the point, the Thai participant's was goal-driven to find a conclusion and an application. This is an indication that she was cognitively present; not only did she try to look for an answer to her question, but how it related to other forms of pronouns, and what kind of rules could be deducted from the answers in turn. It is possible that she had some more background knowledge on the topic than she appeared to have, but her theoretical knowledge could now be applied in a more realistic setting. Future sessions might focus on aiding this learner in integrating this kind of autonomously initiated language development whilst staying on task. A rich source of her language problems can be found embedded in such a task, if she and her partner would pay attention to it.

Continuous development

Several potentially useful sources of information for continuous development can be identified in this study. These could be stored in a portfolio for example, and either used for reflection at a certain point in a course, or reflected on at the end of a session. To be added to the portfolio might be the teacher and student suggestions for

improvement collected from the interview, the student's self reflection based on a comparison of goals stated in pre-task preparation notes and post-task evaluation of performance, and perhaps a peer assessment, if a record was kept of the amount and kind of feedback they received from their partner, and the actual recording of the session. The recording could be used for teacher-student conferences to show improvement and discuss a course of action to follow for future sessions.

Teaching students awareness is not easy, but a constant reminder of the need for reciprocity might serve the purpose. For example, we could ask F> to what degree he felt he was helping T>, and how he could improve this next time. Suggestions for improvement can come from his partner, as she can state her preference for being corrected a certain way for example. The teacher can organize this in a conference with both students, or let them discuss this individually. Of course, the teacher's involvement here might help, perhaps to give helpful reminders or strategies to focus on and single out certain language errors; but this does not exclude matters not relating to language. Equally, a review of a recording can serve as a source to evaluate involvement in the task or topic. For example, a teacher might elicit from F> what alternatives he could consider in his responses, or encourage and guide him in finding better ways to express himself.

Teaching presence: Teaching autonomy skills explicitly

The help a teacher's could provide would have definitely helped in a case like F>'s, as he also mentioned in the feedback session that he would have benefited from learning appropriate techniques beforehand. Some students are more self-driven, like T>. So

perhaps a teacher can show or elicit (using the recording of the session as an illustration) what techniques are available, how tools and techniques can be used, and how they can be fine tuned to become more useful.

Monitoring and guiding interaction during the session

Some other instances in which teacher involvement could have been useful have already been given, yet there were certain moments which seemed more appropriate than others. One of these moments was when F> indicated his difficulty with vowel sounds. Before moving on to tones, the teacher could ask F> to continue this cycle, i.e. to finish the exploration phase in which they were involved. The teacher could, for instance, elicit examples of vowel sound problems from both learners or by posing a better question, not unlike what they had done for the issue F> had with tones. If possible, the teacher would then encourage the learners to continue from that point to the next phase of integration. Addressing the need carrying out all the steps of each of the phases is necessary sometimes, if learners are not aware of the opportunity to do so. The teacher can simply point out the potential benefit that can be gained from certain conflicts with minimal interference. So not only the degree of teaching presence but also the timing of it needs to be adjusted to the context, accordingly.

Also, the issue of tones could have been explored more deeply. The teacher might have instructed F> to think of an application which might have complemented the information T> had supplied him with, in order to complete the cycle of cognitive presence. For example, the teacher could ask him to think of a way to help himself memorize a tone with a word and its associated meaning for the examples given by

T>. This in turn could possibly help him later in vocabulary acquisition and memorization. Even for this session, but more likely for future lessons, teacher intervention might clear up misunderstandings, increase learner awareness and enrich the overall learning experience for tandem partners.

Integrating previous proposals

The suggestions made by Pawan et al. (2003) might have been adapted to this situation, or gradually introduced as students improved collaboration and autonomy.

Task/ class structure

If learners would be given a strict task early on in a tandem course, it might perhaps be too difficult for this level, as also indicated by F> in the interview. However, even from early on, students can be aided in formulating better goals in their preparation notes, and perhaps be asked how they intend to achieve them. This comprises as much of a task as one set by the teacher. In fact, it might more closely match the needs of the learners than a pre-formulated activity with certain objectives; these can be hard to achieve for lower level learners, or tandem partners who have a significant language proficiency gap. Part of teaching presence here would be for a teacher to observe how much class structure students can handle and how much of it is necessary. This need will likely develop over time and fluctuate during the time span of a course.

Staying on task/adhering to responsibilities of one's role.

The learners actually took on their own interpretation of what their role was supposed to be like, and stuck with their assumed role for the greater part of each conversation of each language. The foreign participant seemed to perceive his role as one of mainly answering questions his partner had about culture and language. He acted out aspects of a traditional teacher, in that he appeared to conceive of himself as a dispenser of knowledge. On the other hand, he might also have allowed the conversation to be guided more by his partner than by him. He did have an outline of what he was going to say about his topic regarding culture, but he used his preparation notes to answer questions, while his preparation notes for the session in Thai were mainly for making statements about cultural differences. Quite the opposite of the role that T>, as the EL participant took on the role of causing triggering events. She took the opportunity in both sessions mainly to ask questions about culture, here regarded as triggering events. Regarding language: in the Thai session she mainly corrected mistakes, which could also be regarded as triggering events. If learners had been told to act out according to the responsibilities and duties of their role of either learner or teacher, perhaps there would have been more balance and variety in the functions each performed.

From this data, what might we say about task delegation, description and adherence to task or role, when they are not taught or agreed upon beforehand? From what occurred in this session, we can say that it is a variable that lacks predictability. It is unstable in that it will probably depend on individual traits of interlocutors in most cases. Since these are as varying as personalities, there is no telling how students behave when they are not taught how to, or according to which rules. Nevertheless,

the freedom they gain through an omission of this instruction had positive results for the Thai EL participant. She seemed unbothered by the lack of structure given; the TL participant on the other hand, as he also later confessed in the interview, had probably benefited from more guidance. At times he seemed at a loss of what to do next, often shrugging his shoulders or looking at the teacher for approval or for direction. In such a case, a teacher should provide the necessary guidance.

This difference fits in with the kind of events each participant seemed to cause: the Thai EL participant favored triggering events, whereas the American TL participant was more concerned with the exploration phase. If we were to interpret these findings and use this case as an example, then we might wind up concerning ourselves with a less capable peer being overwhelmed with these matters in an initial session. The decision-making process required for this task (as a language exchange would imply) on top of a lack of language proficiency could have been the factor which negatively influenced the American TL participant. However, further research should examine whether or not instruction on roles would have been helpful, or caused even greater frustration.

Overt instructor facilitation and leadership

Again, teaching presence could have helped to prevent confusion and frustration on several occasions. Also, teaching presence and monitoring could have helped to keep pushing the pace and make sure that cognitive presence was adhered to and followed all the way through. Some suggestions have been made in the previous sections regarding teaching presence.

Student self-coding

To teach self-coding, either in cognitive presence or in peer correction, could prove to be difficult but perhaps not impossible at this level. It will likely be useful if students are able to stay consistent in their practice of this method. Again, for both purposes stated here, in future sessions some time could be dedicated to teaching and practicing these methods.

Little & Brammert's *A guide to language learning in tandem via the Internet* (1996) advises to have students agree on a method for peer correction. Before the session started, during the introduction, the teacher elicited what kind of methods the students knew, and which ones they were likely to use when correcting someone in their language. This might have affected learners' ideas about what they were expected to do. Although students did use several of the methods they mentioned, they used other methods as well. This might mean that discussing the methods beforehand, without explicit teaching or agreement on method, students arrive at their own devices to deal with deviant language they feel needs to be corrected. A teacher needs to allow students to set their own standards in this, yet intervene when unresolvable miscommunication occurs.

However, it might prove useful to give learners explicit instruction on peer correction, and how and when to correct each other. An introduction to peer correction could start with just one or two techniques such as mentioned in the lesson plan format. This was not planned for lesson 1, but expected to be tried in later lessons. Some practice could follow the explicit instruction of these techniques, after which the learners should

focus on using these two techniques in their conversation when correcting each other. The same process might be applied to finding suitable collaborative techniques to teach to tandem learners. Then, once some experience in using such techniques becomes more familiar, self-coding might aid in making it a conscious process and serve as a reminder to stay consistent in its practice.

Cognitive presence

Contrary to predictions made at the outset of the case study, the level of cognitive presence reached phase 4 a few times in the first session. This occurred mainly because of T>'s persistence in attempting to resolve issues. More could have been achieved this session if F> had exerted similar efforts. Indications of F>'s lack of cognitive presence were his lack of responsiveness to triggering events and failure to follow up on his own triggering events. We arrive back at the earlier-indicated need for reciprocity: T>'s ability to learn new things could have been hindered by the lack of cognitive presence of her partner. He also appeared to be not as aware of her needs as she seemed to be of his. Whether this was related to the language proficiency gap, or if it relates to ability in resolving issues, is another matter. Nevertheless, it would still be useful to attend a learner like F> on this matter, so that both learners would benefit more equally.

The teacher's role in matching up students for tandem sessions

They did, suprisingly, come to a full cycle of inquiry in language issues, even if not deeply in more content-rich issues. This might be explained by the difference in level: It is more appropriate when students feel they want to focus on language to have a peer who is much more capable in the target language than they themselves are. Should there be a need for codeswitching, then their peer would in fact also be more capable as a teacher. For the simple reason that he or she could use the language better to explain any issue, as compared to a less capable peer, a possible mini-language lesson after a codeswitch is likely to unfold with more accurate instruction and better comprehension. The other person (the more capable peer) should probably find a more capable or equal peer for him or herself when they arrive at a stage where they want to focus more explicitly on language forms than on culture and language practice, for example. Exposure to different levels of competency in different aspects of tandem learning, collaborative abilities as well as language abilities, is a matching task for the teacher. Throughout a course, a teacher can arrange for different partners to pair up. Just like students in a regular classroom switch partners, certain periods of a course might call for learners to be paired up with someone else.

These learners appeared capable of constructing new meaning through sustained communication in that their efforts resulted in them finding new solutions and possible applications in the real world. At the same time, their findings related to the issue that triggered the respective events. Because of the unanticipated performance of the participants in this case study, it was no longer deemed necessary to continue this study any further. The answer to the research questions at the outset of this study had

been answered sufficiently to remain within the scope of this study. It also put these related issues into a new perspective, which will be discussed in the next section.

Evaluation and future work

Of course, the settings of this experiment will not be found under natural circumstances. Although tandem learning done in an institutional setting may bear similarities to the case settings, the individuals involved will act differently. We can not generalize results; what happened here will probably not happen elsewhere. Nevertheless, the goals set out for the case study were met with more success than anticipated. The results of the case study indicate that learners could benefit from: teacher preparation before commencement of a tandem course; intervention by the teacher while in progress of a tandem session; reflection on student performance as well as teaching practice.

Teaching presence before, during and after the session would have helped these learners, as would explicit teaching on certain collaborative techniques. Whether a strict task is necessary or not depends on the situation. Again, teaching presence is an element in balancing guidance and self-discovery in task objectives. Students probably need a certain amount of freedom to develop in to more capable learners who can set their own objectives. Learners will go their own way, eventually; the trick is to involve the teacher less as students progress in their autonomy. Smaller navigational changes need to be applied as students get used to being in control of mapping out and journeying towards their destinations. The degree to which the

suggestions offered in this current study are applied (if at all) needs to be decided by future teachers of tandem learners.

Limitations

This session was limited to an introduction in tandem learning. As mentioned before, a gradual introduction to peer correction and other collaborative techniques could provide a lot for learners to work with and learn from. Future studies should attempt to discover how these suggested techniques weigh in the scale of teaching presence and learner autonomy. A process of either increasing, lessening and evaluating both of these will develop the necessary awareness for all stakeholders. More extensive resources would help future research, such as access to a computer laboratory with necessary facilities for tandem learning (headsets with microphones, stable network, voice-conferencing software with the option for video and recording functions, webcams). A study with more participants involved in a general language course (which uses tandem learning as one method for learner development) would provide insight into the actual desired process as it occurs. Such a language course would ideally integrate the fostering of autonomy and collaboration in its learners, not just for the sake of tandem learning. With fewer time constraints, an observation of several courses might show a gradual development of learners, and ways of adapting teaching methods to suit learner needs.