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Learner Beliefs in Tandem Learning: A Case Study of Participants in a German-Japanese Intensive Tandem Program

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1. Introduction

Tandem learning is a method of supplemental learning in which two people who speak different languages pair up and help each other study their respective languages. The research presented in this paper is part of my attempt at researching the beliefs of tandem participants in the hopes of achieving a better understanding of how tandem organizers can better meet the expectations and goals of potential participants. Presented here is a small subset of that research, which involved qualitative interviews of 5 German-speaking participants and 1 Japanese-speaking participant in a German-Japanese tandem program which was *bi-national*, *institutional*, and *intensive* in nature.¹ Because tandem learning involves a high degree of autonomy, the set of beliefs which potential participants possess has a potentially significant bearing on how they engage in tandem learning.

Of particular note, all the German-speaking informants had previous experience doing tandem learning, and this was reflected in the sophistication of their attitudes regarding tandem learning. Similar to other informants I have interviewed in other research projects, they felt that tandem learning was most suited to oral communication, however in contrast with informants in the individual tandem program, they recognized its potential for engaging in a range of different learning goals. Opinion was highly variable as to how to correct their partners' errors: some preferred explicit correction, while others preferred implicit correction. Informants saw a role for non-native speakers to participate in tandem learning.

My interest in tandem learning stems from a long interest in how extracurricular activities can be utilized to give language learners more opportunities to communicate in their target language.

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¹ Throughout this paper, the term *participant* is used to refer to students that participated in the tandem program that was the subject of this research, and *informant* is used to indicate those participants who cooperated in this research. Thus, *informants* are a subset of *participants*.

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My two years of experience as an English teacher at universities in Thailand drove home how difficult learning English can be for students with few opportunities to engage with English speakers, whether those speakers be native-speakers or proficient speakers. Learners of Japanese may, depending on their environment, face similar difficulties. Better understanding how to provide learners of Japanese with more opportunities to use the language in communication with native or proficient speakers of it is thus my prime motivation in the research described in this paper.

I was introduced to the concept of tandem learner while a research student at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Finding in tandem learning significant potential for increasing language learners' opportunities for communication with speakers of their target language, I have devoted his graduate school research to it. My goal has been to contribute to a better understanding of learner beliefs regarding tandem learning, in the hopes of gaining greater insight into how organizers of tandem learning can better support participants.

2. Tandem Learning

Tandem learning is, simply put, a method of language learning in which two speakers² of different languages who are studying each other's language pair up to help each other learn. For example, in the tandem learning program which was the focus of this research, German-speaking students who were studying Japanese were paired with Japanese-speaking students who were studying German. Brammerts describes tandem learning thusly:

The value of the tandem learning partnership is clear: each participant has access to the other's knowledge. As both learners are looking to learn the other's language and use both languages to that end, tandem communication offers the opportunity for the partners to evaluate their own learning, correct each other and ask for and receive help from their partner.³

² Please note that in this definition, the term "speaker" is used in a general sense of "person who can use the language" - as opposed to indicating speaking ability specifically. It continues to be a matter of debate whether "speaker" should include only native-speakers, or can include fluent or proficient speakers as well. All the informants reported being native speakers of German or Japanese.

³ Helmut Brammerts and Mike Calvert "Learning by Communicating in Tandem" in Tim Lewis and Lesley Walker, ed., *Autonomous Language Learning in Tandem*, Academy Electronic Publications Limited, 2003, p. 45.

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Tandem learning as a formal concept is generally accepted to have begun with the use of “bi-national courses” attended by participants in the Franko-German Youth Conference of 1968, in which German-speakers and French-speakers were paired up and engaged in language-learning tasks that supplemented the French-language and German-language classes they attended as part of the conference.⁴ In these courses, participants were largely limited to drills which emphasized the language skills they had learned in their classes.⁵

The 1970’s witnessed the expansion of tandem learning within Europe, particularly to Spain, where Jurgen Wolff paired Spanish-speaking learners of German with German visitors to Spain, creating an iteration of tandem learning which was far more independent than the aforementioned bi-national courses.⁶ Such courses have come to be known as “individual tandem.”

Advancements in communications technology, namely the internet, led to the development of “e-tandem” in which participants did not meet face-to-face, but rather contacted each other through e-mail, chat-programs, video-conferencing software, and so forth. Some researchers treat the use of video-conferencing software as distinct from other internet-based technology which rely on e-mail or chat programs, and term the former, *teletandem*.

Tandem learning involves two key principles, that of *reciprocity*, and that of *autonomy*. Participants reciprocate the assistance they have been given by their partners by giving them assistance in turn. Participants are autonomous in that they decide for themselves how and what to study. What participants think they can and should do thus has a potentially greater impact on what they ultimately do. With this in mind, I devoted his research to uncovering the beliefs of tandem participants, in the hopes of contributing to further understanding of how to support tandem learning programs.

2.1 Tandem Learners’ Beliefs

Vassallo and Telles point out that tandem participants play two roles, that of *learner*, and that of *proficient speaker*, necessitating a “dual identity” in which participants potentially call upon a

⁴ Gary A. Cziko, “Electronic Tandem Language Learning (eTandem): A Third Approach to Second Language Learning for the 21st Century,” *CALICO Journal*, 22 (1), 2013, p. 3.

⁵ Maria Luisa Vassallo and João A Telles, “Foreign language learning in- tandem: Theoretical principles and research perspectives,” *The ESPecialist*, 25 (1), 2006, p. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 5.

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different set of beliefs for each role.⁷ Combined with the aforementioned autonomy involved in tandem learning, tandem beliefs have the potential to be rewarding from a research prospective. Despite this, there is relatively little research on tandem learning beliefs.⁸

Examining participants in a face-to-face learning program in a Canadian University, Ryan paid close attention to their motivation in joining the tandem learning program.⁹ Data was collected through questionnaires and interviews. Ryan found that participants tended to have unclear learning goals, but were more often motivated by a desire to gain access to the community of speakers of their target language. This was particularly true of exchange students who felt limited in their social interactions in English.

Ramos observed Brazilian participants in an English-Portuguese *teletandem* project. In addition to participating in a tandem program, these participants were also studying to become teachers of Portuguese or a foreign language, and thus Ramos took the opportunity to observe how their beliefs about language teaching interacted with their beliefs about acting as language experts for their partners.¹⁰ Of particular note, Ramos found that the Brazilian participants were often self-conscious of their deficiencies in explaining their own language, reflecting their attitude that the Portuguese language is particularly difficult.

Elsternmann similarly observed teletandem participants, though in this case observing German-Portuguese teletandem participants.¹¹ She placed particular emphasis on peer group mediation, and found that participants in teletandem placed particular emphasis on the opportunity for learning through interaction, but tended not to see the value in setting clear learning goals.

As a Master's student, I conducted quantitative research on participants in an independent, individual face-to-face tandem program at a Japanese university, and found that participants tended to have a favorable view of tandem learning as a means of practicing oral communication skills, over written language skills.¹² Research informants were generally enthusiastic about helping their

⁷ Ibid. p. 14.

⁸ Unfortunately, I was only able to include the English-language literature on tandem learning beliefs, and was unable to address the Portuguese-language literature.

⁹ Robin Christopher Ryan, *Motivation in Tandem Learning*. Master of Arts thesis. The University of British Columbia, 2008.

¹⁰ Karin Adriene Henschel Pobbe Ramos, "Interactants' Beliefs in Teletandem: Implications for the Teaching of Portuguese as a Foreign Language," *D.E.L.T.A.*, 31-3, 2015.

¹¹ Anna-Katharina Elsternmann, *Learner Support in Telecollaboration: Peer Group Mediation in Teletandem*, PHD Dissertation, 2016.

¹² Benjamin Larson ラーソン・ベンジャミン, *Tandem gakushu ni tai suru birifu ni kan suru ikkosatsu* タンデム学習に対するビリーフに関する一考察, Master's Thesis 博士前期課程論文, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies 東京外国語大学, 2018.

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partner, i.e. demonstrating a conceptualization of reciprocity.

On the whole however, learner beliefs in tandem learning remain understudied. Given the autonomous nature of tandem learning, the beliefs that participants have about it can be expected to have a profound effect on what they ultimately do in tandem learning. While only a modest contribution, I hope that that my research will help increase the body of knowledge regarding learner beliefs in tandem learning.

3. Research Questions

As noted above, I am engaged in research which is concerned with the beliefs of participants in tandem learning towards tandem learning. The research described in this paper involved the following research questions:

- 1.) What beliefs did participants in the tandem language program researched hold towards tandem learning?
- 2.) In what way were the beliefs of the German-speakers researched here distinct?

4. Research Methodology

In this research, I utilized qualitative interviews. While doing so necessarily limited the number of responses I could gather and analyze, it allowed me to ask follow-up questions, and to attempt to gain a more in-depth understanding of informants' beliefs than would be possible in a questionnaire. The other major advantage was the opportunity to try to gauge informants' beliefs indirectly, and to avoid imposing beliefs, which could happen if I asked them to respond to statements in a traditional questionnaire format.

4.1 Research Informants

I interviewed five German-speaking participants and one Japanese-speaking participant in a German-Japanese bi-national tandem program which was conducted intensively over the period of one week in Japan, and under the auspices of the German department of a Japanese national university. The German-speaking participants, including the five I interviewed, were studying

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Japanese in Germany, and flew to Japan for participation in the program, which in addition to the tandem learning involved another week of Japanese classes taught them by graduate students majoring in Japanese education. The five informants I interviewed had been studying Japanese for between 1–4 years. The Japanese-speaking participants, including the participant I interviewed, were studying German in Japan. The tandem program was *intensive*, in that tandem activities were engaged in throughout each day of the program. The organizer structured the day's activities, with each day devoted to both participants' writing of an essay on a theme that had been predetermined by negotiation between the organizer and the participants prior to the start of the program. Tandem pairs used one language for a fixed period of time, switched to the other language for the same period of time, independently wrote their essays, exchanged essays, edited each other's essays, then presented their essays to the entire group. Each day, participants were paired with a different partner.

I chose to observe this particular program because it afforded the opportunity to assess beliefs about tandem learning from the perspective of participants who were well-acquainted with the concept of tandem learning. Tandem learning is fairly widespread in Europe, particularly in Germany, and is a generally recognized term, as demonstrated by the fact that all the German-speaking informants had previous experience doing tandem learning in Germany, and thus carried with them preconceptions about what tandem learning was and how it should be conducted. In the future, I hope to be able to compare the beliefs of participants who are well-acquainted with tandem learning and participants who are new to tandem learning. I interviewed all German-speaking informants in English.

While I was primarily focused, in this specific research project, on the beliefs of the German-speaking participants, I did also interview one Japanese-speaking participant. This informant had been studying German for 1.5 years. I interviewed the informant in Japanese.

Code	Native Language	Interview Language	Gender	Length of study
J01	Japanese	Japanese	Male	1.5 years
F01	German	English	Female	1.5 years
F02	German	English	Female	1.5 years
F03	German	English	Male	1 year
F04	German	English	Male	2 years
F05	German	English	Female	4 years

Figure 1: List of Research Informants

4.2 Research Instrument

I utilized a semi-structured interview to attempt and glean informants' beliefs about tandem learning from them. I structured the questions in such a way as to attempt and elucidate informants' beliefs about tandem learning, namely their beliefs about what tandem learning is good for, how it should be conducted, and what expectations one should have of it. Depending on informants' answers, I asked follow-up questions, meaning that the number and content of questions given to each informant was not identical. Interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. I interviewed each informant separately.

I began each interview by asking about their background in studying Japanese or German, and their previous experiences doing tandem learning. This was followed by two questions regarding their purpose in attending the tandem program, both their primary purposes and any secondary purposes (domain 1). The goal was to elicit informants' beliefs about what tandem learning is good for and what expectations they believed one should have of it. This was followed by questions about the activities they engaged in (domain 2). The goal was to gain an understanding of informants' beliefs about how tandem learning should be conducted. Then, I interviewed the informants as to their expectations of tandem learning. More precisely, the informants were asked what they thought tandem learning was good for, and what they thought it was less good for (domain 3). Questions in domain 4 were regarding how the informants felt they were best able to support their tandem partner's learning. I hoped to elicit their beliefs about how tandem learning should be conducted. The fifth domain contained one question, concerning whether the informants felt that studying with a native speaker, as opposed to someone who is merely proficient, was an important part of tandem learning. Finally, informants were asked about their impressions of the tandem program they had taken part in, in hopes of looking at how their beliefs regarding tandem learning were shaped by the tandem learning program they had engaged in.

Interview Item Domains	
①	Motivation to participate in tandem learning (2 Questions)
②	Tandem learning activities (4 questions)
③	Expectations regarding tandem learning (2 questions)
④	Support given to one's partner (4 questions)
⑤	Expectations of one's partner (1 question)
⑥	Impressions of Tandem Learning (4 questions)

Figure 2: Interview Structure

4.3 Analysis Methodology

After completion of the interviews, I reviewed the recordings, taking note of specific key statements, and then proceeded to refine those statements to focus on those utterances which indicated informants' beliefs regarding what tandem learning should be, and how it should be conducted. Individual statements were compared to each other, to combine ideas which were essentially the same in meaning even if termed in slightly different ways.

I utilized a contextual approach, in which I attempted to ground informants' statements into the context of their own experience with tandem learning, as well as the context of studying abroad in Japan. Key to this was to avoid a judgmental attitude towards their beliefs. This approach is common to learner belief research in general, but it is all the more important in regards to tandem learning, where the autonomous nature of it makes avoiding imposing attitudes on tandem learners key.

5. Results

As noted above, I utilized semi-structured interviews to garner informants' beliefs regarding tandem learning. Believing that overly specific questions might lead informants to express beliefs less reflective of their own attitudes, and more reflective of my own viewpoints, I wrote the interview questions using a general tone that didn't specify beliefs. In addition, although informants were told that this research was about attitudes towards tandem learning, they were not told that it was specifically about learner beliefs, or provided with a definition of learner beliefs. As such many answers were not directly related to beliefs per say, and are not included in the analysis of results. What are included below are informants' answers that reflected their beliefs about tandem learning.

5.1 Motivation (domain 1)

When asked about why they had participated in the summer tandem learning program, three informants specifically mentioned the opportunity for making friends (F01, F02, J01), and a fourth informant noted the opportunity to get to know Japanese people (F03), reflecting a belief that tandem learning is potentially useful for social interaction. Both F02 and F03 took note of the opportunity to learn about Japanese culture, reflecting a belief that tandem learning presents a

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useful opportunity for learning about culture. Most mentioned the opportunity to speak Japanese (F01, F02, F04, F05) or German (J01), with F02 and F05 specifically mentioning the opportunity to be exposed to more natural Japanese, and with F02 specifically noting they wanted to practicing speaking as opposed to grammar, and F04 similarly noting they wanted to practice spoken language as opposed to written language. This reflected a belief that tandem learning is most suited to practicing spoken language, as opposed to written language. F05 had the broadest set of goals, noting the desire to use tandem learning to learn spoken Japanese, grammar, vocabulary, and potentially intonation, and thus reflecting a belief that tandem learning was potentially beneficial for a large variety of learning activities.

5.2 Tandem Activities (domain 2)

I asked the informants about aspects of the activities they had engaged in during the tandem learning sessions. Of particular note, all the informants were positive about the fact that in each session language use was clearly segregated into periods when participants should speak only German and when participants should speak only Japanese. This belief accords with the general consensus in research on tandem learning that language use should be divided in tandem learning sessions.¹³ Three informants (F03, F04, F05) noted that this provided a positive challenge. F01 and F02 did however suggest that switching from one language to the other was difficult.

While some expressed regret that they hadn't been able to choose more of their essay topics themselves, most informants were generally pleased with the pre-arranged nature of the essay topics, and felt that knowing them ahead of time allowed them to increase their vocabulary and challenge themselves. This suggests that while they were aware of the autonomous nature of tandem learning, they accepted some value in having a directive component to tandem learning.

Informants were highly pleased with the fact that they switched partners every day, noting not only the opportunity for interacting with a diversity of people, but also the opportunity to be exposed to different accents and ways of speaking Japanese. This positive attitude towards partner switching is reflective of the belief evinced by most of the informants that tandem learning represents an opportunity for social interaction.

¹³ See, for example, David Little "Tandem Language Learning and Learner Autonomy" in Tim Lewis and Lesley Walker, ed., *Autonomous Language Learning in Tandem*, 2003, pp. 40–41.

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5.3 Expectations (domain 3)

Here, I asked the informants about what they would say if asked, “what is tandem learning good for?” J01 answered simply that it was good for language learning, reflecting utilitarian beliefs about tandem learning. F02 stated that it was good for making friends, reiterating a similar belief to that expressed in regard to motivation in engaging in tandem learning, and expanded upon this by noting the potential to create networks. F01 and F05 argued that tandem learning was good for exposing oneself to natural speech. This belief was similar to that evinced by F04 and F05 when asked about their motivation in participating in tandem learning. F03 pointed to the opportunity to learn a language through interaction, and F04 argued that tandem learning was limitless, and that it was good for more than just speaking, reflecting the beliefs evinced by F05 when asked about their motivation in attending tandem learning.

When asked what tandem learning was not good for, J01 and F05 noted that explaining specific details could be difficult. F03 opined that new ideas could take a long time to explain, F01 noted that native speakers did not always have a good understanding of their own grammar, and F04 pointed out that what one could not do in tandem learning really depended on their partner. With the exception of the pragmatic belief indicated by F04, the other informants indicated beliefs that tandem learning was ill-suited to language-learning tasks focused on specific details, such as grammatical points.

5.4 Partner Support (domain 4)

When asked how they felt they should help their partners, informants were generally split between a belief that their main role was that motivator, and a belief that their main role was that of expert speaker. J01 noted the importance of understanding one’s partner and F03 the importance of helping one’s partner help themselves (motivator). Meanwhile, F04 argued it was their job to help their partner become as fluent as possible, to teach what textbooks could not, and to acquaint them with slang (expert speaker). F05 argued that it was important not to tell their partner incorrect things (motivator). F01 emphasized both roles, stressing the importance of getting one’s partner “into” the language (motivator) and of explaining to one’s partner the reasons for using specific linguistic items (expert speaker).

Error correction is a particularly complex issue in tandem learning, because the participants

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find themselves in an environment which has both academic elements, namely the focus on language study, as well as social elements, namely partnership with a peer. When asked if they corrected their partners' errors, J01 noted that it depended on the situation, F02 noted that they would first ask their partner if they wanted to be corrected, F03 had a strategy of not immediately correcting their partner but instead noting down their mistakes and telling them later, and F04 prioritized correcting only major errors.

As regarded the question of whether to correct their partners' errors explicitly or implicitly, all five German-speaking informants indicated that they utilized both explicit and implicit correction. Notably, F04's strategy was to use explicit correction when implicit correction had not worked, while F01 and F02 stated that they used implicit correction when speaking, but explicit correction when discussing their partners' written errors.

5.4 Expectations of Partner (domain 5)

As noted above, many definitions of tandem learning assume that the participants are native speakers of the language their partner is studying, however some definitions include the possibility that non-native, fluent or proficient speakers may participate. It is not my intent to try and argue for one position or the other in this research, but rather to explore whether informants *believed* that being partnered with a native speaker was important. When asked if they thought it was important to do tandem learning with a native speaker, the German-speaking informants unanimously said that it was, however two of them also noted that non-native speakers could play positive roles as well, with F01 noting that non-native speakers might have a more analytical understanding of the grammar of the language, and F02 and J01 stating that whether a native-speaker as a partner was important depended on the level of the participants.

5.5 Impressions of the Tandem Learning Program (domain 6)

Finally, I asked the informants about their impressions of the tandem learning program they had participated in, and how it compared to their previous tandem learning experiences. F02 and F03 were both positive about having had the opportunity to interact with native speakers, with F02 also noting the opportunity to make friends. F01 was pleased with the amount of time they had had to talk; F04 noted that they had learned slang words, and had improved their writing. While I did

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also ask regarding how informants' experiences doing tandem learning in Germany compared to their experiences in Japan, informants restricted themselves to organizational differences, and did not evince attitudinal differences.

6. Conclusion

I interviewed five German-speaking students, and one Japanese-speaking student, who participated in an intensive, week-long tandem learning program carried out at a national university in Japan. All five German-speaking informants were studying Japanese in Germany, and had come to Japan specifically for the tandem learning program and a follow-up week-long intensive Japanese program. Also, of note, all five German-speaking informants were tandem learning "veterans" in that they had experience doing tandem learning in Germany, and were familiar with the concept, as evinced by the sophistication of their attitudes about it.

I was interested in two research questions: what beliefs did participants in this tandem program hold, and how were their beliefs distinct?

The emphasis placed by a number of the informants on tandem learning as the opportunity for social interaction with speakers of their target language is reflective of Ryan's observations regarding tandem learning participants' desire to utilize tandem learning as an opportunity to integrate with the community of speakers of their target language.¹⁴ This belief in the utility of tandem learning to promote social interaction was made clear in the informants' favorable reaction to the daily partner switching.

In addition to seeing tandem learning as a tool for social interaction, informants also believed it was important for practicing oral communication. It is notable that this emphasis on oral communication was despite the fact that the tandem program they were attending focused on writing activities. Informants did however display awareness that tandem learning could be used for a wide range of language-learning tasks. Informants displayed diverse beliefs regarding error-correction techniques in tandem learning.

It must be noted that this study only represents a small attempt at gaining a sense of what beliefs tandem participants possess. Longer-term studies, which are able to observe gauge changes in participants' beliefs, as well as more wide-ranging studies, which are able to observe a greater

¹⁴ Ryan, *op. cit.*

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diversity of participants, are necessary. Because this research focused on tandem learning veterans, who had previous experience in doing tandem learning, it is of most value in attempting to anticipate the beliefs of students with cultural knowledge of the tandem learning method. At the same time, it is also of value because very little research has been done on tandem learning in Japan.

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