

**FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING *IN-TANDEM*:
THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES AND RESEARCH
PERSPECTIVES**

**Aprendizagem de Línguas Estrangeiras *In-Tandem*: Princípios
Teóricos e Perspectivas de Pesquisa**

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Resumo

A aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras in-tandem, ainda pouco conhecida no Brasil, envolve pares de falantes (nativos ou competentes) com o objetivo de aprenderem, cada um, a língua do outro por meio de sessões bilíngües de conversação. Nesse contexto autônomo, recíproco e colaborativo de aprendizagem, cada um dos parceiros torna-se aprendiz de língua estrangeira e tutor da sua língua materna ou de proficiência. Neste artigo, apresentamos os princípios da aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras in-tandem, propomos um aprofundamento dos mesmos e, por fim, delineamos uma proposta alternativa: o Teletandem, um Tandem virtual que utiliza as ferramentas de escrita, leitura, áudio e vídeo do aplicativo Windows Live Messenger. O Teletandem, atualmente estudado no contexto de um projeto de pesquisa brasileiro - Teletandem Brasil: Línguas estrangeiras para todos, junto à UNESP-Assis e UNESP-Rio Preto, será descrito em futuras publicações.

Palavras-chave: *aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras; Tandem; in-tandem; Teletandem; CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning).*

Abstract

Foreign language learning in-tandem involves pairs of (native or competent) speakers whose aim is to learn each other's language by means of bilingual conversation sessions. It is still not widespread in Brazil. Within this autonomous, reciprocal and collaborative learning context, each partner becomes both a learner of the foreign language and a tutor of his/her mother tongue (or language in which he/she feels proficient). In this article, we introduce the principles and characteristics of foreign language learning in-tandem, propose a deepening of these

principles, and outline our alternative proposal – Teletandem, an online Tandem that uses the reading, writing, audio and video-conference tools of the Windows Live Messenger. Research about Teletandem is currently being developed within the context of the Brazilian project Teletandem Brasil: Foreign Languages for all, at São Paulo State University – Assis, S. J. do Rio Preto -, and its results will be presented in forthcoming publications.

Key-words: *foreign language learning; Tandem; in-tandem; Teletandem; CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning).*

1. Introduction

Consider two proficient speakers, one of French and one of Japanese, sitting face-to-face at home or at a public place. They are sipping their coffee and talking in one of these two languages. They still don't know each other very well, but they have agreed on meeting regularly for a few months, and on alternating the use of the languages, so that each of them can learn the language in which the other is proficient. This is neither ordinary conversation nor common exchange of private lessons, and both speakers are not certified foreign language teachers. None of them will actually *teach* language. Rather, they will *use* language for sharing ideas, thoughts and cultural information regarding France, Japan and their world views. Each of them will try to autonomously learn French and Japanese, respectively, and try to use the languages in this real conversation, while being helped by his/her more proficient partner.

This collaborative, autonomous and reciprocal method of foreign language learning is grounded on few logical rules and common agreements that we will further explore below. It has been known in Europe for decades and, for a number of reasons, it is not quite known in Brazil yet; its name is *Tandem*. Basically, it consists of regular sessions of collaborative bilingual work for didactic purposes. These sessions are voluntarily established by two speakers of different languages. They may or may not be native, they are not professional teachers, and both

are interested in studying the language in which the other is more proficient.

Tandem was conceived in Germany towards the end of the sixties (Rosanelli, 1992; Baumann et al., 1999; Macaire, 2004); then it spread to other countries, first to Spain, where it was given its present form (Wolff, 1991a; Rosanelli, 1992; Herfurth, 1992: 204, 1994: 46 sgg; Brammerts, 2002). Today, it is known as an alternative or a complement to foreign language classroom learning in many European and some non-European countries¹, mostly in private schools of languages² and universities, and in schools, as well. Tandem can be carried out in many different ways, depending on how it is conceived and where and by whom it is carried out. Its flexibility is one of its most important advantages. It can be done independently or be integrated into or complement a language course, with or without counseling, for a short or long time (Rosanelli 1992:9; Brammerts, Jonsson, Kleppin & Santiso Saco, 2002). It can also be carried out in groups (Pelz, 1995; Hansmeier, 1997), such as when students of two different language classes located

¹ The International E-mail Network, a European Union project that was conducted between 1994 and 1996, was extended to more than 12 European countries. Universities in Japan and Rhode Island (USA) collaborated with the project that also had links in Croatia and Korea (Brammerts & Little, 1996:5). The Tandem Guidelines created by the International Tandem Network are available in 10 languages (Brammerts, 1995). Between 1994 and 2003, Tandem partners were found for more than 66.000 learners and in more than 50 languages, by the Tandem Agency of Tandem International Network, (D'Atri & Szymanski, 2003). A Tandem Server is active also in Russia, at Rostov-on-Don (<http://www.rsu.ru/rsu/tandem/>). About Tandem in China, see Stoephasius (undated); in Mexico, see Braun, 2003; in Latin America, see Wolff, 1991b. Tandem literature in the USA is scarce (Cziko, 2004). A wide network of private language schools using Tandem method is the TANDEM International Language Schools Network (http://www.tandemcity.info/ca_index.html), founded in 1983, whose members are mostly in Europe, but also in Peru, Chile and Canada. Tandem started to be used in Universities in the beginning of the eighties (Rosanelli, 1992:13); in 1992/93 the International E-mail Tandem project started by joining 12 universities. The project head was Helmut Brammerts (Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany). The project result was the creation of a still existing network of Tandem Server sites through which it is possible to find a virtual Tandem partner. <http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/>. For school Tandem projects between France and Germany, see the site of the DFJW (Deutsch-Französisches Jugendwerk/Office Franco-allemand pour la Jeunesse) <http://www.tele-tandem.net/sommaire.html>, and Macaire, 2004.

² A wide network of private language schools using Tandem method is the TANDEM International Language Schools Network (http://www.tandemcity.info/ca_index.html). It was founded in 1983, and most of its members are in Europe, but also in Peru, Chile and Canada.

in two different countries interact: this is the case of the so-called intensive *Tandem courses*, where Tandem is integrated into group activities and in which Tandem partners are changed every few days (*binational Tandem*, Herfurth, 1992: 201, 1996: 161). This is the earliest form of Tandem and it is still practiced, mainly in Germany (Macaire, 2004); however, here, we refer to “Tandem” in its most widely known form: the *one-to-one Tandem*, or *individual Tandem* (Brammerts, 2002; Brammerts & Calvert, 2003; D’Atri & Szymanski, 2003).

We start the article with an introduction to the basic tenets of Tandem. We, then, proceed to explore its peculiarities to discuss their implications. We conclude the article with a brief introduction to the project *Teletandem Brasil: Foreign languages for all*³, whose general aim is to offer Tandem to Brazilian University students by means of a specific version we have called *Teletandem*.

2. Tandem principles

In the late sixties, the name *Tandem* was first used in the final part of bilingual intensive courses, organized on the basis of the audiovisual method by the bi-national association DFJW (German-French Youth Organization). It simply consisted of activities between two participants of two different mother tongues. These activities included both shared exercises and conversation about a ready-made material, such as examples of pre-planned dialogues (Brammerts, 2002). Learner autonomy played no role within this context. It was only in Spain, during the seventies, that the name *Tandem* started to be used in its present form (Estévez Coto et al, 1983; Brammerts, 2002), that is, as a method that joins native speakers⁴ of different languages to learn from and to teach each other’s language in an autonomous way, whether

³ Refer to the site of *Teletandem Brasil Project* at www.teletandembrasil.org.

⁴ For a problematization of this concept, see, amongst others, Medgyes, 1994: 9-10; Paikeday, 1985. So far, Tandem literature did not take into account the fact that the concept of the *native speaker* is no longer in use as a scientific concept in Applied Linguistics (for an account of native speaker issues, see Vassallo, 2004). This, however, is not an issue to be focused on, in this article.

or not under the guidance of the professional counseling of a teacher.⁵ In the eighties, it spread to some universities and started to be theoretically researched, mainly with regard to the concept of autonomy (Müller, Wertenschlag & Wolff, 1989). Finally, a systematization of its principles came during the nineties, with the creation of the *International Tandem Network* and subsequent research (Tandem e. V., 1991; Rosanelli, 1992; Brammerts & Little, 1996; Delille & Chichorro Ferreira, 2002; Hehmann & Ponti Dompè, 2003). This literature has defined Tandem principles and Tandem forms, with focus on Tandem counseling, on some institutional projects and on case studies (Brammerts, 2005). The Tandem principles to which we will refer in this first part of the article are grounded on these theoretical developments.

To begin with, Tandem sessions are composed of two parts (Rost-Roth, 1995:5). They may be either chronologically subsequent to each other or done in two different days, but each part must be devoted to only one language (*first Tandem principle: languages must not be mixed*). We believe that this basic principle has often been underestimated in theoretical literature.⁶ Differently, we consider it quite important, because we believe that it either encourages or challenges learners to speak the target language. This is so even if using their language of proficiency could be more easily and more quickly done in order to attain their communicative goals. Furthermore, this basic principle assures that both partners will also have their respective chances to communicate in the language in which they are proficient, particularly when trying to attain communicative goals that would be too difficult or too challenging in the target language. In sum, we believe that this practical principle tends to promote learners' commitment to and involvement with the task.

⁵ Initially, this form started in courses organized by the Goethe Institut of Madrid; then, in a network of private schools, when the intrinsic autonomous characteristic of the method was perceived as being opposed to the traditional institutional role of the Goethe Institut (about this phase and about ideology in forms of Tandem, see Rosanelli, 1992).

⁶ This rule is frequently presented in practical and theoretical explanations about the Tandem method (see for example Rosanelli, 1992:17; Rost-Roth, 1995:5; Brammerts, 2003:16). It is explicitly presented as a *Tandem principle* only by J. Wolff, one of the pioneers of the method, on the site of the Tandem Fundazioa: http://www.tandemcity.info/ca_index.html.

In the Tandem method, participants take turns in acting both as a student of the target language and as a linguistic expert of the language in which each of them is proficient (*second Tandem principle: reciprocity*. Brammerts, 2002: 22-23). They should share the same amount of time as they use the target language, which generally lasts an hour for each.

Tandem lessons are not considered a job. Therefore, partners are not paid and none of them is in debt to each other (Rosanelli, 1992:17). The reciprocity principle of Tandem allows enough space for its partners to feel free of financial commitments to the other. It increases their self-esteem and it puts both participants on equal terms. Tandem is, thus, a free and mutual exchange of knowledge about language and culture (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003:45-51).

Tandem partners are free to decide about *what, when, where* and *how* to study, as well as *how long* they wish to do it (*third Tandem principle: autonomy*. Brammerts, 2002: 22-23). This autonomy principle can bear different interpretations, depending on whether the Tandem is carried out within an institutional context, such as a school or a university (*institutional Tandem*), or as a mutual agreement between individuals (*independent Tandem*).

In the first case, there will probably be some type of pedagogical control or follow-up, some directive procedures, some sort of assessment and a teacher counselor (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003:46-51; Brammerts, Calvert & Kleppin, 2002) who will be responsible for the practical and theoretical framework within which the Tandem process will be carried out (Hehmann, 2003). We believe that, depending on its level of integration into the curriculum - null, partial, total⁷, the *institutional Tandem* will be less or more compelling to learners (Gassdorf, 2002).

In the second case – *independent Tandem* -, autonomy will mean a wide scope of freedom to negotiate levels of responsibility and

⁷ According to Eisner (1994), the null curriculum is simply what is not taught or neglected to be taught by schools. So, by “null level” we mean when the tandem complements or adds to classroom teaching; and “total level” when tandem activities may be totally integrated into the school curriculum as a subject.

reciprocity with the partner. Tandem theoretical literature actually shows two different stances about the level of freedom to be given to Tandem partners: informal processes and low levels of outer control are preferred by Ehnert (1987); Wolff⁸ tends to a stronger institutionalization and is more prescriptive, as far as these issues are concerned (Herfurth, 1992:197). Nevertheless, discussion about the effectiveness of these two levels of freedom is still open (see, for example, Hehmann, 2003).

The *autonomy principle* is relevant, because it seems to control the levels of responsibility and power that the proficient speaker may have over his/her partner's learning process. Tandem participants are never all alone in their process and each of them may be supported and encouraged by his/her more proficient partner in a collaborative endeavor. We believe that Tandem partners must also take a reasonable amount of responsibilities over their own foreign language learning process. Whether this fact increases learners' motivation⁹ and creativity still remains to be investigated.

Choices regarding what to do in Tandem sessions are generally left to partners' decision, especially in independent tandems (see Souza, 2006 and his study about an Australian and a Brazilian student conducting their Tandem). One of the commonest and most popular activities is free conversation (partners talk about whatever they wish to¹⁰). They can also carry out collaborative projects of their choice concerning both languages; they can share grammar exercises or do any other activity aimed at learning the target language¹¹. Because Tandem has a flexible learning context, it provides its participants with

⁸ In 1994, Wolff founded the Tandem Fundazioa, a non-profit Foundation which "grants licenses for the use of the tandem method and trade mark as well as specializes in the improvement of the quality of the TANDEM intermediation", as it is explained on its site (<http://www.tandemcity.info/index.html>). A concept of Tandem as a "licensed trade mark" is implicit in this approach, with best results being granted by a specific set of techniques. We are not committed to Wolff's stance, because it is too much tied to the concept of technical rationality (Schön, 1983).

⁹ By *motivation* we mean *learners' involvement with their own in-tandem learning process*.

¹⁰ Free conversation was, for example, the most popular choice between the Tandem partners studied by Rost-Roth, 1995.

¹¹ For a review of activities chosen by Tandem partners, see for example St.John & White (2003) and Rost-Roth (1995:58-66).

adequate contexts to freely explore their own creativity, as far as language learning is concerned.

The rhythm of learning is also quite flexible and open to negotiation between partners. They can meet every week, twice a week or agree on other time intervals. In the period between two sessions, both of them can organize their study schedule according to their needs, objectives and preferences. *In-tandem* learning can also be a learner-centered and quite individualized foreign language activity, in the sense that both partners can tailor their own syllabus according to their very own personal needs.

Because of all these characteristics, the Tandem method has several elements of relevance to foreign language teachers, researchers and teacher educators. It provides FL teachers with the possibility to put their students into natural contact with proficient (or native) speakers by means of personal, purposeful and direct interaction. It provides researchers in Applied Linguistics with an intricate observation context of foreign language acquisition, as well as the opportunity to study learners in a natural, creative and communicative context of collaborative learning. Interesting examples of these research experiences can be found in Banelli (2002) and Souza (2006). The former illustrates the characteristics of Tandem conversation between second language learners as far as repair and metalinguistic communication are concerned; the latter analyzes the collaborative events of an *in-tandem* learning experience between an Australian and a Brazilian student who exchanged classes of English and Portuguese. Another interesting example of research experience may be found in Rost-Roth (1995), who compared conversation in both language classroom and in face-to-face Tandem, by means of Conversation Analysis. Finally, Tandem provides foreign language teacher educators with the opportunity to implement challenging pedagogical themes, such as collaborative learning and learner autonomy¹² within a natural context of language practice (see Wasson & Morch, 2000).

¹² Here we wish to suggest the multiple meanings that these two concepts may take to many research paradigms. For a comprehensive review on the concept of collaboration and the distinction between collaboration and cooperation, see Figueiredo (2006); for a thorough review on the concept of autonomy, see Paiva, 2006 and Finch, 2000).

3. What Tandem is: its peculiarities

So far, the literature has emphasized the principles we have mentioned above. However, despite their importance, we wish to argue that the pedagogical context of Tandem is far richer and more complex than it has been demonstrated by its literature. Our argument relies on the fact that there are other important and uncovered characteristics of Tandem that we wish to highlight in the following pages. We believe that they make Tandem a quite peculiar and alternative didactic context for the teaching of foreign languages. We consider all of these characteristics as priority research areas.

Firstly, it is a given fact that foreign language teaching is carried out in a very rich number of ways. Its pedagogical contexts also range widely from individual (with or without a teacher - private lessons, self-instruction) to group contexts (such as classroom settings or immersion programs). All of these contexts have their strengths and weaknesses¹³. When compared with them, Tandem bears a different type of learning context. Such context “shares aspects of both natural settings and formal instruction in addition to having the power of combining the best aspects of both” (Cziko, 2004:2). We are dealing with an approach that has its very own characteristics, that emerge from (and range within) the association of its principles of autonomy and of reciprocity. Because of these peculiarities, we believe that Tandem may be described as a learning context that:

- (a) offers opportunities for both sociability and individualization;
- (b) is based on autonomy, that is understood here as a responsibility for one’s own decision-making, not in isolation, but “with” or “in relation to” the other (one’s Tandem partner);

¹³ Bibliography about the varieties of learning/teaching contexts is actually coincidental with the very history of learning/teaching approaches.

- (c) implies sharing and relaying the roles of who retains the power of knowledge; and
- (d) challenges the position of the teacher in the learning process – a position that requires alternative attitudes to teachers' roles towards counseling.

These specific characteristics, which will be further detailed below, justify our interest in the Tandem approach, as they inspired us to conceive a variation of it – the *Teletandem*, which we intend to explain in detail in forthcoming publications.

3.1. Sum of opposites: sociability and individualization

We believe that the first peculiarity of Tandem is its strong association with both the individual and the social dimensions of learning foreign languages. Theories of Second Language Acquisition have, so far, remarked the importance of these two factors in language learning/acquisition (see Ellis, 1995, 1996). However, in traditional second/foreign language teaching contexts, both dimensions are often in conflict. For example, classroom lessons offer a wide range of possibilities of interaction, but they give scarce attention to individual learning styles and to learner autonomy (Cadamuro, 2004:95-129). In turn, private lessons offer a wider space to learner individuality. However, they give little space to the social and to the interactive dimensions of foreign language learning.

Differently, and in an original way, Tandem learning contemporaneously gathers the maximum of individualization with the maximum of socialization. How? On the one hand, the Tandem curriculum emerges from partners' needs and involvement. It may be, therefore, quite learner-centered and open to individualization. On the other hand, one must not ignore the fact that the Tandem curriculum, as many other forms of curriculum¹⁴, emerges from learners' relationships

¹⁴ See Eisner & Vallance (1974).

(Rost-Roth, 1995:31-35), as they share their individual needs. It is, therefore, centered on interaction through collaboration, making the social dimensions of learning (sociability) the very core of this approach. Brammerts & Calvert (2003) point to this dialectic nature of the Tandem context by saying that:

(...) the collaboration is equally beneficial to both [Tandem partners]; however, each of them can try to achieve his/her own learning objectives. There are good chances we can have a strong motivation because: It is rewarding the fact of being able to communicate with a native speaker [sic] about a subject that was chosen by both; learning has practical application and does not undergo external pressures; progress can be experienced immediately. (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003: 37)

Shortly, within the Tandem learning context, these two traditionally opposite poles – the individual and the social - are associated in original, innovative and harmonic ways, all of them in need of further research, so that they can be better understood.

3.2. Neither a teacher nor a classmate, but a Tandem partner

The second peculiarity of Tandem is its *partners' roles*. In most learning contexts, learners' and teachers' roles are distinct¹⁵. Rodgers (2001) presents a useful synoptic view of the roles defined by teachers and learners within the most widespread methods of foreign language teaching:

¹⁵ We are aware that there is a vast literature on the relationship between learning context and learners' and teachers' roles that could be explored here. However, we have omitted it due to restrictions of focus and space. For that, see Abrahão (2004), Gimenez (2002), Barbara & Ramos (2003), Celani (2003), Assis (2005), and Stirling (2005). About roles of Tandem partners, see Brammerts, 2002: 21.

TEACHING METHODS AND TEACHER & LEARNER ROLES		
Method	Teacher Roles	Learner Roles
Situational Language Teaching	Context Setter Error Corrector	Imitator Memorizer
Audio-lingualism	Language Modeler Drill Leader	Pattern Practicer Accuracy Enthusiast
Communicative Language Teaching	Needs Analyst Task Designer	Improvisor Negotiator
Total Physical Response	Commander Action Monitor	Order Taker Performer
Community Language Learning	Counselor Paraphraser	Collaborator Whole Person
The Natural Approach	Actor Props User	Guesser Immerser
Suggestopedia	Auto-hypnotist Authority Figure	Relaxer True-Believer

Figure I: Methods and teacher and learner roles

(Source: Rodgers, 2001:01)

Despite the distinctions between methods and between learner and teacher roles, as shown in Figure I above, we wish to argue that these roles do mingle within the Tandem learning context. Actually, this shifting of roles is still another point that needs to be accurately investigated. Nevertheless, the point we wish to stress here is that, because of its autonomy and reciprocity principles, everyone participates in Tandem learning, both as a learner and as a proficient speaker (Brammerts, 2002:21). Both roles are carried out alternatively, and this shifting of roles contributes to the dual identity of the Tandem partner: he/she has the traits and plays the roles of both the teacher and the classmate but, at the same time, differs from them substantially.

In fact, as proficient speakers of a language they feel proficiently enough to teach¹⁶, Tandem participants know more about their partner's

¹⁶ It may be their own native language.

target language. Such position gives them the normative power of the linguistic “expert”, particularly in the specific case of the native speaker (Paikeday, 1985; Rampton, 1990; Phillipson, 1992; Medgyes, 1994; Kramsch, 1998:79). Also, their role could be viewed as being similar to that of a teacher. It is, however, different, since they may neither exercise an institutional power over their partners, nor a strictly institutional and scholastic evaluative function, due to the very Tandem structure, as we have explained above. Obviously, that does not mean that Tandem partners are neutral, as far as use of power is concerned. In line with Foucault (1995:248), we believe that relationships, particularly the ones that are “poorly managed”, are always subjected to multiple types of power exercise and evaluation and it would be naïve to think that Tandem practitioners are free of them (Rosanelli, 1992). Research is, then, needed to verify how power is exercised and how it is shared and negotiated between partners within such a particular learning context, such as the Tandem, in which participants’ roles resemble that of a peer and in which a more proficient partner neither organizes lesson plans nor (at least explicitly) determines the syllabus.

In sum, Tandem partner’s roles need to be investigated from the point of view of various disciplines. First, because they mingle characteristics that are quite distinctive from other learning/teaching contexts; second, because, in Tandem sessions, ordinary teacher-student and peer relationships are subverted, giving way to alternative and peculiar partners’ relationships that shape (and are shaped by) the Tandem learning context.

3.3. Towards a global symmetry

We believe, then, that the third peculiarity of Tandem is the relationships between its participating partners. In Conversation Analysis, classroom relationships have been described either as asymmetrical (teacher-student) or symmetrical (peers) (Linell & Luckmann, 1991; Orletti, 2000). However, we do find Tandem partners’ roles quite imbricate. Because of such complexity, a mere discussion of these roles in dual terms of symmetry and asymmetry would be inappropriate and rather shallow. Instead, we prefer classifying these

partners' relationships in terms of a balance that is determined by the *reciprocity principle* cited above – a principle that somehow imposes a relay of roles between Tandem partners. This is to say that, in every Tandem session, the partner who plays the role of the language expert (therefore, a more powerful role) will always play a less powerful role when he/she becomes the learner (Rosanelli, 1992:20). Therefore, both asymmetric situations may neutralize each other by producing what we call *global symmetry*. As a consequence, for the Tandem learner, speaking the target language with a proficient speaker tends to be less intimidating than it is in other foreign language learning contexts. This is so because Tandem learning requires shifting of roles (from learner to tutor and vice-versa) during Tandem sessions (Herfurth, 1992: 209). On the one hand, this relay of roles may mingle the negative consequences of the asymmetry between the less and the more proficient speaker; an asymmetry that may induce feelings of inferiority, power dynamics, fear of error, shyness (Hehrfurt, 1992: 212; Rost-Roth, 1991: 36). On the other hand, this relay of roles may work towards maintaining the positive aspects of this asymmetry, such as the cognitive and affective support to the learner that is offered by the proficient speaker, within the so-called zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Learners' affective filters, in terms of the long revered Krashen (1985), could have less possibility of being raised in this context, due to the complicity induced by the balance of roles.

Global symmetry, if confirmed by empiric results of further research, could turn out to being one of the most original elements of the Tandem: it could distinguish this method from other forms of collaborative studying, such as the traditional *peer tutoring* and *peer collaboration*, where such role relay seems to be inexistent¹⁷.

3.4. A homeostatic device

The fourth peculiarity of Tandem is its intrinsic motivation device. In addition to their own internal and external motivations, each

¹⁷ See Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000, for a review of cooperative methods.

Tandem participant is also motivated by the Tandem *homeostatic*, self-regulating mechanism: learners can obtain from their partner only what they, too, are willing to give him/her in the next turn (see the principle of reciprocity in Brammerts & Calvert, 2003:44)¹⁸. For example, if one wishes high commitment from his/her partner to language feedback, he/she, in turn, must show a similar or the same high commitment to it, otherwise partners will experience unbalance of efforts or of commitments to their goals, and that may cause tension between them (Gouldner, 1960). If one of them happens not to follow the joint agreements, the Tandem is bound to fail, since it is based on mutual efforts and agreement. This is another aspect of Tandem that still needs to be adequately researched. On the base of an attentive consideration of various concepts of *reciprocity*, the hypothesis of a homeostatic device acting between Tandem partners could contribute towards elucidating *in-tandem* learning processes. It is also important to note here that, as a self-regulating property to keep the balance of the Tandem relationship between partners, the homeostatic device of practical motivation is far from being the abstract obligation that is commonly found in other learning contexts. This device stimulates both learning autonomy (everyone takes responsibility for what he/she really wants to do) and learning socialization (everyone receives only to the extent he/she has given). Such homeostatic device may turn out as a very powerful impulse towards learning, because it works towards keeping the balance of partners' actions within the Tandem interaction. The research agenda of the *Teletandem Brasil Project* intends to obtain empirical data to confirm these issues by investigating Tandem processes that have failed.

3.5. Intrinsic autonomy

The fifth peculiarity of Tandem is its *intrinsic learner autonomy*. It is not a mere characteristic, but the most important tenet of a Tandem process. In this sense, the meaning of autonomy in Tandem may be quite different than it is commonly conceived in some other learning

¹⁸ A comprehensive review of the literature about the reciprocity concept is given in Guéguen, 2002: 213-218.

settings (cf. Paiva, 2006, for a comprehensive review of the literature on the concept of autonomy). In the context of Tandem, autonomy is not conceived *without* the other but *with* the other; that is in *co-laboration*.

As it has been noted by the director of an Italian Tandem school¹⁹, when people decide to learn a foreign language, they first tend to look for a professional with whom to share the responsibility for their own learning – someone who “knows more”, who can regulate and who can organize the learning process. Despite the fact that learning has much to do with one’s active endeavor, many students prefer to handle over the power and the responsibility of their learning experience to a teacher.

Differently, learning *in-tandem* means explicit acceptance of being an autonomous participant of one’s own learning, as well as acceptance of the fact that one is able to manage, in first person, one’s own study of a foreign language. This may be referred to both the technical meaning of the term “autonomy” and to its political meaning (Benson & Voller, 1997). Anyway, it does require one’s comprehensive review of beliefs of learning, either as a mechanic process or as a mere process of knowledge transfer. It may also mean giving up beliefs of language learning processes as only being managed by professionals, who are able to make them happen in pedagogical, scientific and controlled ways. In fact, foreign language learning *in-tandem* results from a natural process of interaction that, *per se*, is not so controlled and scientific (Rosanelli, 1992:21). “Natural” means, in this case, that such interaction is content- and information-oriented, that it arises from learners’ own communicative needs, and that it is triggered by their attempt to communicate with the other. The Tandem learning context, therefore, can also become quite puzzling for students who are used to either the “right” teaching method or the traditional instructor’s frontal lesson, within which so many students have been “trained” from childhood. From this point of view, Tandem may often challenge implicit

¹⁹ A. Mazza, director of the private language school Alfa&Beta in Bolzano, Italy: conversation held with Maria Luisa Vassallo during the VIII International Tandem Congress, “Lingue e culture in contatto”. Bolzano, October 10, 2005.

theories about learning and it may trigger critical reflection on fossilized teaching/learning beliefs, as described in Vassallo (2006). Research projects about beliefs of Tandem partners within the context of the *Teletandem Brasil Project* will deepen this aspect, trying to evidence changes in beliefs before and after the Tandem learning experience.

3.6. Pleasure

The sixth peculiarity of Tandem is its potential to promote *pleasure of intercultural interaction*. One very pervasive and common belief of learning, challenged by recent language teaching approaches (Mitchell & Myles, 1998; Balboni, 2000) is the idea that real study and real learning must be heavy and boring (Balboni, 2002; Lombardi, 2006; Caon & Rutka, 2004:22). Since Tandem is also a form of interaction²⁰, it is not possible to undertake it without partners' spontaneous active and interactive participation and involvement. Like in most forms of interaction, it may include sense of humor, emotions and pleasure in the exchange of experiences, as well as negative feelings of tension, demeaning competition, frustration, irritation and even anger. All of these elements are bound to occur in and to affect the process of Tandem learning even in more personal and direct ways than in other learning settings, due to the autonomous, one-to-one dual nature of the Tandem relationship. We can speculate, with a certain lack of evidence, since research in this area of Tandem studies is scarce, that this is because Tandem supplies direct and personal context for experiencing intercultural and interpersonal exchanges. From that comes the natural involvement and curiosity of the Tandem participants in relation to their partner and to the learning tasks that they carry out during the Tandem process. We do believe that pleasure is, therefore, an important component of *in-tandem* learning. Although it is difficult to be characterized and described, we do sense it in different personal ways, as teachers and learners. However, qualitative research studies that adopt constructionist, interpretive, hermeneutic paradigms (van Manen, 1990;

²⁰ See Rost-Roth, 1995, about the predominant importance of interaction in partner's views of Tandem.

Mueller-Vollmer, 1994; Moustakas, 1990)²¹ remain to be conducted in order to show empirical data about how Tandem practitioners go about with their feelings while practicing Tandem.

4. What Tandem is not

Association of sociability, individualization, originality of the roles of Tandem partners, global symmetry, homeostatic device, team identity, intrinsic autonomy and pleasure all define an intricate foreign language learning/teaching approach that is grounded on very simple “rules of practice” (Elbaz, 1983). Because of its apparent simplicity, we believe that the complexity and the didactic power of Tandem are not easily captured at a glance, unless one experiences it.

At this point, we would like to add other characteristics of the notion of Tandem learning that, so far, we have been trying to outline. They have to do with what Tandem *is not* - at least in our own way of conceptualizing it, a way that will have central implications to our pedagogical proposal that we outline in the following sessions of this article. In fact, the initial impression that a person has from its description makes it difficult to distinguish Tandem interaction from other forms of interaction or from other individual study contexts. For example, Tandem may seem quite similar to (a) ordinary conversation with a foreign friend, to (b) self-tutored study, or to (c) private lessons. In the following pages, we wish to outline and to explain these three differences.

4.1. Tandem is not chatting

One of the commonest techniques during Tandem lessons is assisted conversation. We call it “assisted” because the proficient speaker carries out a kind of *scaffolding* process (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1966)

²¹ Differently from behavioristic and positivistic paradigms of research, we are neither interested in “measuring pleasure” nor in knowing which partner has more pleasure during a Tandem session, because we consider students as individuals who hold different life, contextual and situated learning experiences.

in order to supply the less proficient learner with the linguistic elements he/she needs for achieving his/her communication goals.

However, one may find it difficult to understand the difference between Tandem conversation and ordinary chats with a nice foreign friend who is willing to correct one's grammar and vocabulary mistakes. These two types of conversation are actually different, because its procedures are systemic, goal-oriented and collaborative, at least as far as its foci on content, form, lexicon and culture are concerned. Below, we try to summarize the reasons (which, in fact, seem like "rules of the Tandem game"), as we have in mind the specific form of Tandem that we elaborated:

- Tandem is a joint endeavor that consists of regular meetings extended over a specific time period (each time lasting for a fixed number of hours), whereas ordinary conversation is generally occasional and not so pre-planned.
- Consequently, just like in regular school lessons, Tandem meetings will have to take place, independently of its participants' wish to interact at that specific moment (because of partners' joint agreements).
- In Tandem sessions, like the goals of the Tandem conversation, linguistic and cultural interests are explicitly defined, because such interests are just as important as any other component of the interaction. These goals supply learners with enough interactive space and freedom to break certain politeness rules and conversational principles in order to improve their linguistic and cultural competence without the interactive implications that such rupture would have in ordinary conversation. In fact, Tandem conversation is regulated by its own principles and it is both culturally and linguistically goal-oriented.
- For these reasons, in our version of Tandem, in the *Teletandem Brasil Project*, we advise that a phase of *focus on form* should take place, either during or in the final part of the Tandem meetings. These are moments in which participants explicitly discuss linguistic rules, lexicon and errors. Within the limits of his/her competences, the more proficient partner has the responsibility (autonomy *with* the other) of

collaborating with the less proficient one. In that way, the competences that are, then, constructed constitute the final results of the Tandem session (cf. Freire, 2003:182, about construction, co-construction and re-construction of knowledge). Grounded on these competences, the learner will be able to elaborate his/her homework for the next session. Such behavior makes Tandem conversation quite different from ordinary conversation.

- Because of this attention to form during Tandem sessions, participants must develop the ability of contemporaneously paying attention to both levels of conversation - the *content/meaning level* (*what one says*) and the *form level* (*how one says*). Definitely, this is a rare or non-existent behavior in ordinary conversation.

- During Tandem meetings, different levels of FL linguistic competence between both participants constitute neither an obstacle nor a nuisance to either of them and to the learning of the less proficient participant. These differences work the opposite way in daily conversation, though. In fact, in daily conversation, the language that is better known by one of the participants predominates (Banelli, 2002; Aston, 1988). The Tandem principle of not mixing languages prevents the emersion of such preponderance, even if it is involuntary on the part of the more proficient partner. This principle also guarantees that the same amount of time is dedicated to the less known language.

- Finally, the ultimate goal of Tandem conversation is not only the success of interaction, as it is in ordinary conversation, but also (and above all) the development of participants' linguistic and cultural competence. The success of Tandem, therefore, cannot be evaluated only by the establishment of a good relationship with the partner, but by the *achievement of linguistic and cultural objectives*, as well.

All of the above statements, however, need to be investigated on the basis of empirical data that will be provided by the *Teletandem Brasil* project.

Some examples can help to better explain the differences between the practice of Tandem learning and ordinary conversation. Whether we are used to talking with foreign friends or we are living

abroad as a student of a foreign language, we will frequently find quite hard to obtain regular and constant feedback to our oral or written production. In fact, linguistic competence evaluation and error corrections are difficult to obtain from friends, either in ordinary conversation or in practical situations abroad. In these cases, conversational and interactive rules of daily life prevail. Once engaged in ordinary chatting, our friends will focus on interaction and, most commonly, on meaning, instead of on how we talk. In this case, automatic devices of accommodation will prevent them from noticing our errors in the target language. Besides, due to the implicit negative meaning of correction in daily life contexts and because of certain conversational rules, it is quite difficult for them to correct our errors, even when they consciously notice them.

Regardless of our friends' willingness, therefore, target language feedback will not arise in very detailed ways during ordinary conversation with them. Rather, it may come more in the form of compliments or encouragement than in the form of useful corrections, probably due to restrictions of time and of face keeping. Moreover, focusing double attention on both meaning and form may become a straining task. It requires willingness and persistence, and it is less likely to happen for an extended period of time, unless a specific goal is settled. Such language feedback behavior is more likely to be obtained by a study companion, such as a Tandem partner, because he/she also has similar and complementary interests in being corrected and helped.

In sum, although ordinary conversations with foreign friends or in daily life abroad do offer good opportunities to practice a foreign language, they are not to be confused with Tandem conversations, for the above stated reasons.

4.2. Tandem is not self-tutored study

Misleading notions of autonomy that are based on common sense, such as the common belief that the "autonomous" or the "self-sufficient" person can go about without anybody's help, may suggest the idea that there is no difference between studying a foreign language

in-tandem and studying it in an individual way. This is not so. It is true that Tandem partners are not professional teachers and that they do not help (at least, directly or explicitly) to organize the other partner's study.

Nevertheless, collaborative study makes a great difference to one's conception of learning. Tandem may lead partners to act as a team, within which each member's actions and attitudes are complemented by the other partner's. After all, the pair, as a whole, is proficient in two languages. This complementarity can create a pair identity that is attractive to both participants, even though both have their linguistic limitations in each foreign language.

Studies on social interdependence and on group collaboration have named this situation *cooperative interdependence* (Deutsch, 1949, 1962) or *positive interdependence* (Johnson et al., 1991; Johnson & Johnson, 1998b). These studies present three possible forms of social interdependence: (a) *negative interdependence* - everyone in the group works against the other, since one's success diminishes the others'²²; (b) *null interdependence* - each person works only for him/herself and there is no relationship between the person's success and the group²³; and (c) *positive interdependence* - one cannot succeed unless everyone else does²⁴. It is possible that the partners' interdependence within the Tandem learning context has to do with this latter form.

In order to have positive interdependence, it is necessary that personal identification with the group occurs, as it may be the case of the Tandem context. In this circumstance, the knowledge of every member of the group will be considered as co-divisible and shared by all other members. The elements of this interdependence have been listed as follows:

Depending on whether individuals promote or obstruct each other's goal accomplishments, there is substitutability (i.e., the actions of one person substitute for the actions of another),

²² We can call it autonomy *against* the other. (Franco, 1995)

²³ We can call it autonomy *without* the other. (Franco, 1995)

²⁴ We can call it autonomy *with* the other, in line with philosophical views of contemporaneity (see Franco, 1995)

cathexis (i.e., the investment of psychological energy in objects and events outside of oneself), and *inducibility* (i.e., openness to influence). Essentially, in cooperative situations the actions of participants substitute for each other, participants positively cathect to each other's effective actions, and there is high inducibility among participants. (Johnson & Johnson, 1998a:4).

Some of the effects showed in a positive interdependence context, cited by Johnson & Johnson (1998a, 1998b), are giving and receiving help and assistance, exchanging resources and information, giving and receiving feedback on task work and teamwork behaviors, challenging each other's reasoning, increasing efforts, mutually influencing each other's reasoning and behavior. All of them may be true for the Tandem context, but hardly exist in self-tutored study. Positive interdependence as the central difference between self-tutored study and the Tandem context needs further and specific designed research.

4.3. Tandem is not a private lesson

The learning context of a private lesson could also be compared or confused with the one of the Tandem. Just as well, the context of a private lesson can be described as a collaborative one, within which a more proficient speaker helps a less proficient one to gain proficiency. Nevertheless, the sometimes rigid asymmetry of the private lesson that is due to the opposition of roles *teacher vs. student* makes it distinct from Tandem lessons.

Furthermore, private lessons are frequently carried out on terms of a financial agreement, whereas Tandem lessons are based on terms of free exchange of knowledge.

Finally, as far as private lessons are concerned within this context, much is expected from the professional practitioner (the teacher) with regard to content and to pedagogical knowledge. The learner's senses of responsibility and of autonomy, typical of the Tandem context, do not seem so relevant in private lessons, at least in some cultures. For

all these reasons, we believe it is inappropriate to consider Tandem lessons as private lessons or even a variation of it.

5. Implications

Summarizing the characteristics that we have outlined above, we can say that Tandem is

- (a) a sum of opposites, such as sociability and individualization;
- (b) a collaborative joint endeavor with a partner aimed at learning a foreign language;
- (c) a global balanced context within which partners' relationships can relay roles of power;
- (d) a context within which one can take responsibility for and socialize learning in reciprocal and autonomous ways;
- (e) a context within which one can exercise autonomy and manage one's own learning process; and
- (f) a context with space for one's pleasurable relationship and full involvement with one's own process of learning a foreign language.

Almost thirty years ago, Viola Spolin (1976), the Arts educator who created the Improvisational Theater, said that, as teachers, we do not teach anybody anything, but rather, we set up contexts for experiencing. All these Tandem characteristics that we have so far outlined break away from traditional approaches to language as mere sets of rules to be learned. These Tandem characteristics open spaces for experiences and interaction amongst the peoples and cultures of the world. Furthermore, they have relevant implications to alternative and experiential conceptualizations of foreign language teaching and curriculum. By this, we mean a foreign language curriculum as a *flow of events* (Pinar & Reynolds, 1992), or as chosen *stories to be lived* (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) with the people and the culture of the target language.

As educators and applied linguists who have gone ourselves through *in-tandem* experiences, we believe that the Tandem characteristics presented above have pedagogical implications to the setting up of adequate contexts within which learners live out their stories with their Tandem partners in the target language (Telles & Vassallo, 2005). By *living out these stories* we mean to experience the target culture in the “flow of events within the target language” that will characterize partners’ relationship identities during the Tandem process.

However, we do not wish to promise a “Tandem rose garden” here. Much is left to be discussed and explored about *in-tandem* learning and the roles that foreign language teachers will be playing in this process. Its characteristics and their respective implications also open an array of reflective spaces for research about the features and the role of interaction in this (at least in Brazil, new) foreign language educational context. This is because it focuses not merely on learning but, rather, on the experiencing *in* the foreign language. For example, in addition to the prospective research themes we have presented above, we need studies on the role played by Tandem partners in the process of introducing their languages and cultures and helping each other to build one’s identities and relationship with the target language and culture. It is by these relationships with the target culture and its people that an individual’s interest in them will probably grow.

For example, Rolnik (1993) has used the expression *to inhabit a foreign language*, as she discussed her experience as a Jewish Brazilian girl who had to deal with three languages simultaneously in her process of literacy – Portuguese, Yiddish and Hebrew. As she puts it, “an experience of *nomadism* throughout the languages and the worlds that talk through these languages: inhabiting each of these worlds and allowing them to inhabit myself” (Rolnik, 1993:20 – our emphasis). She further argues that transit through those languages helped her to notice the de-naturalization of the codes (languages), that these codes “are not the essences of our being but, rather, they are ways by which it is coalesced” (Rolnik, 1993:20). For her, venturing herself through these languages were never “dangerous experiences”, and that, once it is de-essentialized, our being does not cease to exist (Rolnik, 1993).

These ideas can offer, for example, promising themes of research to Applied Linguistic studies on Tandem and on cultural identity and to those who are interested in the ramifications between users and learners of foreign languages and their contextual relationships.

6. We have come a long way: the *Teletandem Brasil*

Tandem has been scarcely practiced in Brazil²⁵ due to the fact that it was first conceived as *face-to-face Tandem*. Although this form still appears to be the richest and most complete, it can only be carried out in places where proficient speakers of foreign languages are present, such as in tourist cities, at national border regions or at universities where foreign students can be found. The dimensions of most European States make traveling abroad a relatively low price activity, particularly within the academic contexts of current exchange programs for students of the European Union²⁶. Face-to-face Tandem activities, therefore, become quite possible in Europe.

However, in most parts of Brazil, there are no such opportunities, due to its geographical location and dimension and, consequently, to the high costs of traveling outside of this country. These geographical, dimensional and economic obstacles to contact with foreign languages and cultures may very well provoke feelings of provincialism and isolation in our young citizens. There are, indeed, only a few places in Brazil where Tandem could be easily practiced in its original face-to-face mode. Despite Brazil's multicultural society, contact of Brazilian citizens with foreigners and foreign countries is scarce, except in large urban centers and tourist cities. These geographical, dimensional and

²⁵ We have found only 66 references to Tandem within the Brazilian national context on the Google browser in March 2006. On these sites, Brazilian Master and Doctoral dissertations about Tandem totaled 3, all of them referring to written forms of Tandem (de Oliveira, 2003; Braga, 2004; Souza, 2003a). Articles about Tandem totaled 4 (Souza, 2003b; 2005a; 2005b; Marques & Zahumensky, 2005)

²⁶ For example, Erasmus - *European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students* - the European Commission's educational program for Higher Education students, teachers and institutions. See http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/erasmus/erasmus_en.html for more information.

economic limitations are probably the reasons why, so far, the Tandem method was not so widespread in Brazil. Nevertheless, we have come a long way. The wide spreading of the Internet during the 1990s has brought popularity to the Tandem method, by means of e-mail Tandem (*e-Tandem*). This form has known some success also in Brazil, in recent years (de Oliveira, 2003; Braga, 2004; Souza, 2003a; Souza, 2006; Marques & Zahumensky, 2005), but it is restricted to the written medium; it excludes the complexity of oracy and it cannot develop the most natural, complex, useful and common form of interaction - audiovisual communication. Nowadays, nevertheless, new technologies are giving access to and possibilities of carrying out a distance Tandem that resembles, quite closely, the pedagogical and communicative characteristics of its eldest brother, the original *face-to-face Tandem* (Schwienhorst, 1997). The insurgence of new computer-supported learning environments that promote collaborative efforts among students (Santoro et al., 2003; Fundaburk, 1998; Schwienhorst, 1998) associated with recent written, voice and image devices of communication softwares such as Skype and Windows Live Messenger offer broad perspectives to foreign language teachers and students. They can, now, have access to direct and day-to-day communication with different languages and peoples in the world through the Internet.

These recent advancements have led us, the authors of this paper, to conceive a third form of Tandem as *Teletandem* - a new reading, writing and audiovisual approach to Tandem, that we have been studying in the *Project Teletandem Brasil: Foreign languages for all*, at UNESP – São Paulo State University - Department of Education (UNESP-Assis), and the Graduate Program in Language Studies (UNESP – S.J. do Rio Preto), Brazil²⁷. We can, now, offer Brazilian students the possibility of using the Tandem method. Through *Teletandem*, they are able to test

²⁷ It is important to note here that, a few months after we had named this third form of Tandem as *Teletandem*, we found out that the same term had also occurred to Macaire (2004) and the project of which she is part (see <http://www.tele-tandem.de/>). However, our concept of *Teletandem*, which we intend to present in a subsequent publication following this article, differs quite clearly in terms of audience, principles and procedures. For example, Macaire deals with French and German children by using bilingual communication, and she does not adopt the principles of non-mixture of languages and language feedback.

the principles of *in-tandem* learning that we have outlined in the first part of the article. The notion of *Teletandem*, which is grounded on the principles we have summarized in this article, will be explained and described in a forthcoming publication.

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