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# **Innovations in English Language Education: New Issues and Trends**

Edited by Bronwen Hughes and Margaret Rasulo



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GIUSEPPE BALIRANO and MARIA DE SANTO\*

## Learning English in the Digital Age: eTandem, Autonomy and Intercultural Communication in Online Educational Environments

### Abstract

*This study explores how informal language learning activities, such as eTandem, can be enhanced through digital environments designed to foster learner autonomy, improve language acquisition, and promote intercultural communication. eTandem, an evolution of the original face-to-face Tandem language exchange, leverages emerging communication technologies to enable students to engage in authentic language exchanges while benefiting from the flexibility and accessibility of online platforms. Set within a language university context, the research investigates how eTandem has been integrated into online educational environments, specifically the eLearning platform Moodle. By integrating the potential of digitally-enhanced educational spaces with the pedagogical principles of learner autonomy, this study suggests that eTandem may serve as an effective strategy for enhancing language learning outcomes in higher education, particularly in fostering communication and intercultural dialogue among students. From the students' perspective, eTandem is seen as an opportunity not only to improve their language skills but also to connect with peers from different cultures, enriching their overall learning experience. The study also emphasises the importance of providing structured guidance, incorporating reflective practices, and fostering collaborative engagement to fully realise the pedagogical potential of eTandem.*

**Keywords:** eTandem, ELT, digital educational platforms, learner autonomy, intercultural communication

### 1. Introduction

This study examines how the affordances of digital technologies and novel educational environments may enhance traditional language learning

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The authors jointly contributed to the design and implementation of the research and to data analysis and discussion; specifically, Giuseppe Balirano is responsible for the sections: Introduction, Enhancing intercultural awareness through multimodal creativity and Conclusive remarks and future developments; Maria De Santo is responsible for the sections: Theoretical background, The context of the study, The eTandem corner and The students' perspective on eTandem.

methodologies, such as Tandem language exchanges. Tandem refers to an open learning approach through which two individuals with different native languages work together to improve their language proficiency, while developing at the same time their knowledge of each other's culture (Brammaert 1996). It fosters not only intercultural competence but also collaboration and independence in language learning through "authentic communication with a native speaker" (Brammaerts 1996:13).

Central to Tandem learning are the principles of reciprocity and autonomy. According to the principle of reciprocity, both partners are expected to contribute equally to the learning process and gain equal benefits from the experience, as learning in Tandem is based "on the reciprocal dependence and mutual support of the partners" (Brammaerts 1996: 14). In line with the principle of autonomy (Holec 1981), considered as a capacity for self-direction (Gremmo/Riley 1995; Holec 1996), "all tandem partners are responsible for their own learning" (Brammaerts 1996: 14), by defining objectives, activities, and learning schedules. The distinctiveness of Tandem compared to other conventional methods of language learning, as well as the originality of its contribution, stems from its integration of autonomy, reciprocity and interculturality (Woodin 2018). As a result, Tandem language learners have the opportunity to:

- (a) contribute equally to the learning process and share benefits to the same extent;
- (b) improve their abilities in the foreign language while facilitating their partner's language learning, acting as both learners and teachers;
- (c) take responsibility for their own learning (Holec 1981) and make decisions by setting plans, choosing objectives and methods (Little 1991).

In other words, successful Tandem learning relies on interdependence (Kohonen 1992), collaboration, and mutual support in a context that promotes students' autonomy and enhances their engagement in the learning process.

The original principles of Tandem learning have undergone continuous adaptation and reassessment, largely influenced by "the fast-evolving language learning situations along with the linguistic and sociocultural realities of an increasingly globalised world" (Tardieu and Horgues 2019: 1). Technology

has played a crucial role in the evolution and transformation of Tandem language learning methodologies. To exploit the potential of the Internet for language learning in Tandem, *The International E-mail Tandem Network* was established in 1994 by the Ruhr-Universität Bochum, together with its partner universities of Oviedo and Sheffield. The network's aim was to enable students "to work together across national boundaries in order to learn languages from one another and to learn more about one another 's culture by learning in Tandem" (Brammaerts 1996: 22).

Since its original format based on face-to-face meetings, Tandem learning has evolved significantly with the advent of Computer-Mediated Communication (Herring 1996), developing into telecollaborative language learning projects (Little 2016), based on asynchronous e-mail exchanges (Little *et al.* 1999; Ushioda 2000) or synchronous communication through Multiple User Domain, Object-Oriented (MOO) platforms (O'Rourke 2005). The integration of Web 2.0 tools (Pomino/Salom 2016), social media platforms (Alberth *et al.* 2019), and applications that facilitate the autonomous search of tandem language partners has further contributed to the spread of electronic Tandem (eTandem) (Cziko 2013), the digital equivalent of face-to-face Tandem, in both informal and institutional contexts.

eTandem is widely adopted in university contexts as it provides language learners with more opportunities to study and practise a language through authentic interaction with peers. Moreover, it fosters intercultural dialogue, which, according to the Council of Europe (2008: 46), "aims to develop a deeper understanding of diverse world views and practices, to increase co-operation and participation (or the freedom to make choices), to allow personal growth and transformation, and to promote tolerance and respect for the other".

Against this backdrop, the present study explores how the potential of eTandem in enhancing learners' linguistic and intercultural competence (Tian/Wang 2010) can be further amplified through digital educational environments and tools specifically designed to support autonomous language learning.

## **2. Theoretical background**

This study draws on the evolving pedagogy at the intersection of English Language Teaching (ELT) and digital technologies, building on concepts

such as learner autonomy (Benson/Voller 1997; Holec 1981; Little 1991, 2022;) and technology-mediated language learning (Levy 1997; Chapelle and Sauro 2017; Chun *et al.* 2016; Stockwell 2022; White 2003).

Learner autonomy, a well-established and extensively researched concept in the field of ELT, empowers learners to take responsibility for their own learning processes, fostering a sense of agency and accountability that contributes to more effective and individualised language acquisition. Initially defined by Holec as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (1981: 3), the principle of autonomy in language learning has been mainly conceptualised as a skill that learners progressively develop. Little (1991: 4), in turn, defines autonomy as a “capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action” and further highlights the “teaching/learning dynamic in which learners plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their own learning” (Little 2022: 64), emphasising the role of teachers in the progressive development of learner autonomy.

Benson and Voller (1997) outlined five different ways in which the word ‘autonomy’ has been used in language learning (Benson/Voller 1997: 1–2, emphasis in the original):

1. for *situations* in which learners study entirely on their own;
2. for a set of *skills* which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
3. for an inborn *capacity* which is suppressed by institutional education;
4. for the exercise of *learners’ responsibility* for their own learning;
5. for the *right* of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

A broader definition of autonomy was provided by Oxford (1999) who affirms that autonomy is: “the (a) ability and willingness to perform a language task without assistance, with adaptability related to the situational demands, with transferability to other relevant contexts, and with reflection, accompanied by (b) relevant action (the use, usually conscious and intentional, of appropriate learning strategies) reflecting both ability and willingness” (Oxford 1999: 110–111). Oxford (1990, 2016) also contributed to the understanding of learner autonomy through her work on language learning strategies, by highlighting the importance of

strategic competence in autonomous learning. She identified a complex set of language learning strategies – actions that learners adopt to both process the language and manage their learning process. Cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies are essential as they enhance learners' ability to adapt to different learning contexts and transfer linguistic and meta-cognitive skills across various tasks and educational settings, thus promoting autonomous learning.

Learner autonomy in language education, initially associated with self-instruction in language learning (Dickinson 1987) and individualization (Brookes/Grundy 1998), has gradually been represented as a skill that can be nurtured in social contexts, through interdependence and collaborative efforts among learners. The literature on autonomy consistently highlights its social dimension (Murray 2014), along with a focus on collaborative approaches (Johnson *et al.* 1998) and communities of practice (Wenger 1998).

The relationship between independence and collaboration, which is essential to Tandem learning, was also highlighted by Little (1996), who stated that: “If learning is essentially an interactive process, then the development of learner autonomy is a collaborative matter; and the support that learners can give to one another plays a crucial role in the transition from dependence on the teacher to wholly independent task performance” (Little 1996: 31).

In sum, autonomy is neither a “single, easily described behaviour” nor a “steady state achieved by learners” (Little 1990: 7); rather it is the result of a global and dynamic process that arises from the interaction between individual agency and social engagement. It is characterised as “individual and collaborative, cognitive and affective, organizational and communicative” (Little 2015: 25).

The concept of autonomy in language learning has gradually evolved from an emphasis on individual independence to a more fully developed framework that includes social interaction, strategic competence, and technological integration, thus highlighting its different dimensions.

The process of autonomisation (Holec 1981) is inherently linked to teaching and learning environments. Autonomous language learning, initially explored in school classrooms through learner involvement in curriculum negotiation, classrooms activities, and the use of learning materials (Dam

1995), gradually found its optimal implementation in educational spaces such as self-access centres (Gremmo/Riley 1995; Gardner/Miller 1999, 2011; Sheerin 1991, 1997), where technology provided the foundation for the development of learner autonomy. This interrelation between technology and autonomy has continued to evolve through technological innovations and pedagogical approaches developed over the years.

Specifically, the advent of Web 2.0 offered new opportunities to enhance autonomous learning (Cappellini *et al.* 2017) through Social Networking Systems and online learning platforms, such as the Learning Management System (LMS) Moodle. These technologies have facilitated the creation of digital educational environments (De Santo 2024) conceptualised as social learning spaces (Murray *et al.* 2014), where learners engage in authentic social practices and collaborative learning experiences, develop autonomous learning abilities, and benefit from collective knowledge and support.

Further technological advances emerged in ELT during the period of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Hodges *et al.* 2020) and were consolidated in the post-pandemic period (Balirano/Rasulo 2024). This included Social Media-based EFL teaching and learning (Zulli 2024) and the most recent AI-driven educational technologies (Wei 2023). These new trends in ELT, by leveraging the affordances of digital technologies, not only enhanced students' proficiency in the target language but also aimed to develop different abilities, such as autonomy, collaboration, and intercultural communication, which are also the core principles of Tandem learning.

### **3. The context of the study**

Over the last two decades, Tandem language learning has been one of the primary projects promoted by the Language Centre (CLAOR) at the University of Naples L'Orientale, with the aim to promote learner autonomy and improve students' proficiency in foreign languages, particularly English. Additionally, tandem seeks to support the concept of Internationalisation at Home, defined as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight 2004: 11). Through Tandem exchanges, Italian students can practice English with English-speaking peers from various countries, while international students learn Italian from their Tandem partners to better integrate into the university

environment and follow lectures conducted in Italian. In this context, Tandem language exchanges are not intended to replace formal language instruction but rather complement institutional language courses and promote autonomous language learning within the Self-Access Centre.

Since the late 1990s, when the University's Language Centre was awarded the European Language Label<sup>1</sup> for the establishment of the Self-Access Lab (1998), it has consistently aimed to enhance language learning and promote autonomy by providing ways to study languages in a technology-based learning environment, namely the Self-Access Centre (Vincent 2002; Cordisco 2003; De Santo 2009; De Santo *et al.* 2014), where learners are offered multimedia resources, supervision by language counsellors, and peer learning initiatives such as group work and Tandem sessions.

To address the growing demand for online language learning opportunities and provide students of English with authentic language learning experiences, the Language Centre has progressively expanded Tandem language exchanges into online settings. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the project has been conducted online, which has significantly influenced the tools and methods used to implement the project, as well as the learning outcomes.

### *3.1. The eTandem project*

This study specifically focuses on eTandem language exchanges between Italian university students of English and English-speaking learners of Italian from international universities. The project, started during the COVID-19 pandemic, was originally conducted entirely online and organised following a series of structured steps. Students were paired by the Centre's language counsellors based on responses to an initial questionnaire, which collected information regarding their proficiency level in the target language, degree course, additional languages spoken, and preferred times and days for scheduling meetings. Subsequently, the counsellors introduced the project to participants by providing detailed information on its principles and implementation, including

<sup>1</sup> The European Language Label is “an award encouraging the development of new techniques and initiatives in the field of language learning and teaching, as well as the enhancement of intercultural awareness across Europe” (European Commission n.d.).

guidelines for scheduling meetings and suggested activities to facilitate Tandem exchanges. Throughout the project, counsellors monitored the participants progress via emails and online questionnaires, offering support when needed. Students were asked to notify the counsellors of their first meeting and then submit an email describing and summarising their language exchange experience at the end of the project. They were also encouraged to contact the coordinators to seek assistance or report any issues, such as the difficulties scheduling meetings or other organisational problems.

Informal feedback collected from emails and questionnaires during the first two years of the eTandem project indicated that students needed additional support, particularly during the initial stages of the program. It became evident that their learning experience could be enhanced by creating a space where they could share experiences, familiarise themselves with the counsellors and other participants, and access resources relevant to language exchanges.

To address these needs, and alongside the digitalisation of certain learning activities and resources – such as the virtualisation of the self-access centre to allow students to study autonomously online, free from time and space constraints of the physical self-access centre – a dedicated digital space was developed to support eTandem learning. The project's structure was furtherly adjusted to promote greater interaction among participants, provide tools that facilitate autonomy and self-awareness, and introduce final multimedia tasks to consolidate learning outcomes.

### *3.2. Methodology and data collection*

In order to explore the impact of digital educational contexts on eTandem, a qualitative analysis was conducted on a corpus of data collected from 30 students participating in the project and enrolled to the *eTandem corner* in the academic year 2023–24. Data collection employed a combination of methods, including observation of forum interactions, analysis of online questionnaires and learner logs, and examination of students' multimodal final tasks. These tools were designed to document participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections on the eTandem project, including their motivations for participating, perceived challenges, and insights into the linguistic and cultural benefits derived from the exchange.

The observation of forum interactions involved monitoring student exchanges within the digital environment. Specifically, the forum in the *eTandem corner* served as a dedicated space where participants could introduce themselves to other community members, share expectations, and express personal opinions about their eTandem learning experience. Participants' posts analysed in Section 5 were collected from the first thread in the Welcome forum.

Data from online questionnaires were gathered at three key stages: initial, mid-term and final phases of the project. These questionnaires, available in the eTandem corner in the section dedicated to monitoring and self-assessment, provided valuable insights into the evolving perspectives of participants at different points in time. However, for the purpose of this initial study, only data from the mid-term and final questionnaire will be discussed, in conjunction with their initial perspectives as outlined in the Welcome forum. This will provide an overview of their viewpoints throughout different phases of the project.

The dataset was further enriched by the multimodal texts produced by students at the conclusion of the project. These outputs will be examined in Section 6 to observe students' use of various multimodal resources – such as text, images, and videos – to facilitate intercultural communication and express cultural identities.

#### **4. The *eTandem corner***

The *eTandem corner* is an academic space designed specifically for students participating in the eTandem project at the Language Centre of the University of Naples L'Orientale. This online environment, implemented on the University's Moodle-based elearning platform, serves as a supportive learning space that facilitates the development of learner autonomy and intercultural collaboration. Its primary objective is to improve students' learning experiences, foster reflective practices, and enhance critical thinking skills. It provides students with access to various resources, such as project-related information, self-assessment tools, and activities for metacognitive reflection. The *eTandem corner* not only promotes autonomy by encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning process but also stimulates interaction among participants through forums, thereby enhancing both linguistic competence and cultural understanding.

In order to push learners' metacognitive development and autonomy, the digital space is structured according to the pedagogical model developed by Cotterall and Murray (2009), which identifies five key affordances: personalisation, engagement, experimentation, reflection, and support. Hence, through eTandem exchanges, students are encouraged to engage in activities that explore authentic topics and issues of personal relevance, and to reflect on their learning process while receiving support from language counsellors.

Like other forms of autonomous language, online Tandem exchanges require guidance and support from experts, such as teachers or language counsellors, who provide scaffolding strategies throughout the learning process. Within the context of this study, the role of the language counsellor has been pivotal in supporting students in engaging with the Moodle-based digital educational environment.

#### *4.1. The phases of the project*

The eTandem corner provides a structured framework supporting the different phases of the project, including:

- welcome session;
- self-assessment of the initial level of competence;
- project self-monitoring;
- monitoring sessions;
- final multimodal product.

After the formation of the Tandem pairs, students access the virtual space and begin familiarising themselves with both the environment – through forums, guides and checklists – and the members of the learning community, including language counsellors, their Tandem partner and other peers participating in the project. In this virtual space, students have the chance to self-assess their language proficiency using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) self-assessment grid.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The self-assessment grid illustrates the levels of proficiency described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The self-assessment grid (i.e., Table 2 [CEFR 3.3]) displaying the Common Reference levels is available online at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-2-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-self-assessment-grid> (Last accessed: September 30, 2024).

The self-monitoring phase involves the compilation of a learning diary, which provides both students and counsellors with a detailed record of the participants' language learning experience. Students are encouraged to maintain a log of their eTandem sessions, by documenting activities, language use, and intercultural interactions. This log also serves as a tool for metacognitive reflection, enabling students to evaluate their own learning progress and set future goals.

Additionally, learners complete ongoing questionnaires designed to provide language counsellors with feedback on the overall progress and effectiveness of the project. Pedagogical mentoring, defined as “the guidance by a teacher or facilitator during a virtual exchange to support student engagement, collaboration and learning” (Gutiérrez *et al.* 2022: 152), was integral to the eTandem exchanges, particularly during the initial and final phases. Pre-mentoring and reflective-mentoring (O’Dowd *et al.* 2020) were implemented through a series of activities that accompanied students throughout their eTandem experience. Initial pre-mentoring was facilitated through interviews, forum posts, and the provision of short guides and checklists, while the concluding phases involved self-assessment and metacognitive reflection through online questionnaires.

The eTandem project has also been enriched by offering students the occasion to create a final multimodal learning product, which they post to the virtual space at the end of the project. This digital environment, in sum, has been designed as a place where students can share ideas and activities, collaborate using the communication tools provided by the e-learning platform, receive guidance and support from language counsellors, and publish their final learning products.

### **5. The students' perspective on eTandem**

Central to the *eTandem corner* is the active engagement between students participating in the project. This interaction is facilitated through a Welcome forum, where students are encouraged to build a community of practice (Lave/Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) by introducing themselves and expressing their expectations regarding the Tandem language learning program. Comments posted in the Welcome forum in the online Self-Access Lab provided a way to observe students' perspectives on this learning methodology and their expectations for their learning experience,

thus serving as an instrument to perform an initial needs analysis of the learners.

Table 1 displays students' posts in the Welcome forum and highlights their perceptions of the Tandem project and the goals they have when engaging in this intercultural language exchange. The data presented consists of students' comments categorised into four distinct themes based on their motivations and perceptions regarding participation in eTandem, namely, judgments and perceptions, cultural and social engagement, language skill enhancement, and academic advancement and career preparation.

<i>Students' comments in the Welcome forum</i>	
<i>Category</i>	<i>Posts</i>
<i>Judgments and perceptions</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I saw Tandem as an amazing opportunity</li> <li>2. Practising with a native speaker is the best way to get familiar with the language; it's also more fun and engaging</li> <li>3. I am doing the Tandem project because there is no better way to learn a language than with native speakers</li> <li>4. I want to jump at the chance my university gave me including in this incredible experience.</li> </ol>
<i>Cultural and social engagement</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. I decided to participate in this project to meet people interested in Italy and learning Italian</li> <li>6. I would like to meet new friends</li> <li>7. I decided to participate in the Tandem project to learn about new cultures</li> <li>8. I enrolled in the Tandem project to help with Italian</li> <li>9. I chose to participate in this project because I like to meet new people and learn about new cultures</li> <li>10. ... to meet people with similar interests</li> <li>11. I decided to join to Tandem project to meet new people who live in another part of the world also teaching them a little bit of Italian</li> <li>12. My motivation was to meet people interested in improving their Italian and to learn more about Italian culture</li> <li>13. I hope to be able to connect with others and learn Italian culture</li> </ol>

<i>Students' comments in the Welcome forum</i>	
<i>Category</i>	<i>Posts</i>
<i>Language skill enhancement</i>	<p>14. I decided to participate in this project because practicing with a native speaker is definitely the best way to improve a language</p> <p>15. I decided to join the Tandem project to improve my speaking and grammatical skills</p> <p>16. I decided to participate in the Tandem project with the aim of improving my speaking skills</p> <p>17. The motivation that led me to participate in the eTandem project is my desire to practice English with a native speaker, improve my speaking, and increase my fluency</p> <p>18. I would like to improve my Italian</p> <p>19. I enrolled in the Tandem project to improve my English</p> <p>20. What led me to participate in the Tandem project is my goal of further improving my speaking skills</p> <p>21. I chose to participate in this project to improve my spoken English</p> <p>22. ... to improve my speaking abilities</p> <p>23. ... to improve my Italian speaking skills</p>
<i>Academic advancement and career preparation</i>	<p>24. ... to have a better chance of passing the exam</p> <p>25. ... to increase my chances of passing the exam;</p> <p>26. I hope to learn something new and improve my knowledge</p> <p>27. I wanted to gain Italian knowledge before I go abroad to Rome next year</p> <p>28. ... because I hope to study in Rome my sophomore year</p> <p>29. I hope to further advance my Italian because I want to learn a third language</p> <p>30. I am considering minoring in Italian</p>

Table 1. Students' comments in the Welcome forum.

As can be observed in Table 1, the first category, 'judgments and perceptions', reflects the students' initial expectations on the project (comments 1–4) and highlights their motivation (Deci and Ryan 2020) for participating in Tandem exchanges. Statements such as "I saw Tandem as an amazing

opportunity” (1) and “there is no better way to learn a language than with native speakers” (3) express their appreciation for the initiative and suggest that students perceive Tandem as a valuable learning experience that offers benefits beyond traditional language courses.

The second category, namely ‘cultural and social engagement’ (comments 5–13), reflects students’ willingness to broaden social networks and increase cultural understanding. Statements such as “I chose to participate in this project because I like to meet new people and learn about new cultures” (9) and “I decided to join the Tandem project to meet new people who live in another part of the world also teaching them a little bit of Italian” (11) underscore their view that interaction with others in meaningful social contexts may significantly enhance intercultural awareness.

Comments in the third category, ‘language skill enhancement’ (comments 14–23), focus on the development of specific language skills, particularly speaking proficiency. For instance, the statements “I decided to participate in the Tandem project with the aim of improving my speaking skills” (16) and “The motivation that led me to participate in the eTandem project is my desire to practice English with a native speaker, improve my speaking, and increase my fluency” (17) emphasise the desire to enhance oral fluency and acquire language-specific competencies. These comments suggest a goal-oriented approach, as students are aware of their linguistic shortcomings and seek specific opportunities to address them, aligning with the literature on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) that highlights the challenges of language learner in mastering speaking skills (Thornbury 2005; Hughes/Reed 2017; Munro/Thomson 2022; Goh/Liu 2023). Data collected show students’ awareness that speaking is considered one of the most challenging skills. Moreover, the posts in the fourth section, ‘academic advancement and career preparation’ (comments 24–30), reveal that participation in eTandem is also tied to tangible outcomes, such as improved grades, future study abroad opportunities, or language proficiency required for professional advancement. According to the students, language exchanges offer “a better chance of passing the exam” (24) and help prepare for career advancement, as evidenced by statements such as “I wanted to gain Italian knowledge before I go abroad to Rome next year” (27) and “I hope to study in Rome my sophomore year” (28).

In sum, the distribution of comments across categories reveals that, while a majority of students are motivated by language skill enhancement (indicating a clear awareness of their educational needs), there is also a strong attention to cultural and social engagement. This dual focus highlights the importance of integrating social and cultural elements in language education, as students are not only looking to improve linguistic proficiency but are also seeking meaningful intercultural interactions. Furthermore, the comments in the ‘judgments and perceptions’ category indicate a highly positive attitude towards the eTandem project (e.g., “Practising with a native speaker is the best way to get familiar with the language; it’s also more fun and engaging” and “I want to jump at the chance my university gave me including in this incredible experience”), suggesting that students effectively consider it as an innovative and effective complement to traditional language learning methodologies. The presence of comments linked to ‘academic advancement and career preparation’ further illustrates that students are approaching the project strategically to meet their long-term academic and professional goals.

As previously mentioned, the students’ perspective on eTandem has been collected in different phases of the project with the double aim to monitor the program and offer participants frequent opportunities to reflect on the learning path, activities, and objectives. Following the analysis of the initial comments in the forum, the mid-term questionnaire provides a feedback that is essential to the exploration of students’ reflection on project. To this aim, Table 2 reports participants’ responses regarding learning objectives and activities carried on during language exchanges:

<i>Participants’ description of learning objectives and activities reported in mid-term questionnaire</i>
1. We are mainly focusing on vocabulary, curiosities, and cultural aspects, especially the differences between the two languages, trying to improve speaking skills. Sometimes, I answer her questions or clarify grammatical difficulties, correct her pronunciation, or recommend sources where she can deepen her understanding of certain topics.
2. We are working on translating from Italian to English and conjugating verbs in the present tense in Italian.
3. For grammar, we are focusing on the conjugation of <i>essere</i> and <i>avere</i> in Italian and idioms in English. Regarding cultural aspects, we have talked about food, national holidays, work, school life, and immigration.

<i>Participants' description of learning objectives and activities reported in mid-term questionnaire</i>
4. We are discussing about phrasal verbs, slang, and also Italian grammar.
5. We are comparing cultural differences.
6. Currently, we are focusing on the most popular idioms and phrasal verbs in the United States and Italy.
7. Usually, we discuss each other's grammar mistakes and speaking in general.
8. During our sessions, we mostly read and converse. Initially, we have free conversations, and then we read and translate texts together.
9. Phrasal verbs (in English), fixed expressions, idioms.
10. For English, we are focusing on pronunciation and grammar questions, differences between more colloquial and formal forms, and nuances of meaning. For Italian, we are concentrating on basic grammar (verb conjugation, gender and number agreement of adjectives and articles) and basic vocabulary.
11. Everyday verbs and vocabulary.
12. Mainly cultural aspects – differences. The vocabulary that emerges from the conversations is very varied since we talk about many topics.
13. For Italian, we are focusing a lot on verb conjugation. From a lexical point of view, she learns new words from different fields and colloquial expressions for conversation every time.
14. For English, we focus a lot on conversation and the social aspects of our respective countries. We also do review exercises on English grammar topics I have difficulty with (like conditional sentences), and she helps me a lot with exercises like fill-in-the-gap for my English exam preparation.
15. Regarding Italian for her, we have focused on conversation and verb exercises, as she doesn't have the opportunity to practice with a native speaker. For English for me, we have concentrated on word formation, which is my weak point, and conversation.
16. We are working on <i>passato prossimo</i> and <i>imperfetto</i> , when to use <i>essere</i> and <i>avere</i> , and essential vocabulary for daily life.
17. We focus a lot on the present tense when speaking Italian since that is my current level. We don't really stick to a specific grammar concept; I usually ask her questions about certain verbs or conjugations when I need help.
18. We are focusing on grammar for both languages and working on translating Italian into English, so I can practise reading and translating.
19. Currently, we are focusing on the most famous idiomatic expressions in Italy and the United States. In general, we like talking about music, travel, and linguistics.
20. She helps me with Italian grammar, and I help her with the history of the United States and Mexico.

Table 2. Participants' description of learning objectives and activities reported in mid-term questionnaire.

As shown in Table 2, the analysis of the students' comments reveals a strong sense of reciprocity between participants, highlighting how eTandem fosters linguistic development, autonomy, and intercultural awareness. Students actively contribute to shaping their learning experiences, as demonstrated by statements such as "We focus on the present tense when speaking Italian since that is my current level" (17). This shows that students are not passively following a fixed learning plan but are instead making informed decisions about which aspects of the language to prioritise based on their individual learning goals. This analysis led to the identification of three essential aspects that can be identified through their comments:

- 1) *Autonomous learning choices*: learners exercise autonomy not only in selecting the topics to work on, but also in determining the methods and strategies to use. Comments like "I usually ask her questions about certain verbs or conjugations when I need help" (17) reflect an ability to self-assess and seek targeted support, while "We are working on translating from Italian to English" (2) indicates strategic use of translation to enhance both language comprehension and production. Such comments reveal an active role in shaping the learning process, demonstrating autonomy in content, methods, and pace.
- 2) *Cultural awareness and intercultural exchange*: the tandem experience also broadens the participants' cultural understanding through discussions on topics like food, national holidays, and school life (3), to name a few. Students frequently refer to comparing cultural differences, as seen in the comment "We are comparing cultural differences" (5), which illustrates their engagement in exploring each other's cultural backgrounds.
- 3) *Reciprocity and mutual support*: there is a clear sense of reciprocity in the exchange, evident in phrases such as "She helps me with Italian grammar, and I help her with the history of the United States and Mexico" (20). This indicates a balanced partnership where both students contribute equally to the learning process, promoting a collaborative environment.

The data thus suggest that the eTandem exchange supports not only linguistic growth but also promotes a shared intercultural awareness, where both students take active roles in facing linguistic and cultural challenges together.

The outlook on students’ perceived efficacy of eTandem concludes with Table 3, which displays students’ suggestions and comments in the final questionnaire.

<i>Students’ final comments and suggestions on eTandem</i>
1. I liked the project, as well as the fact that we were supported throughout its duration. I would definitely do it again.
2. The project was very useful and stimulating. It would have probably been even more satisfying if it had taken place in person. Additionally, the project duration could be extended.
3. I believe it would be helpful to have some guidelines, topics to discuss based on language level, and suggestions for how to conduct the meetings in a way that achieves specific learning goals. Often, the meetings tend to be pleasant conversations which, although productive, do not always meet specific objectives.
4. I find the monitoring and the log to be very valuable support tools.
5. Perhaps a greater number of hours.
6. Maybe provide a list of topics to start talking about.
7. No suggestions, I had an awesome experience and formed a friendship with my partner!
8. Provide more materials to discuss during the meetings.
9. This project would be more helpful if it started earlier in the semester.
10. Perhaps the project could start a bit earlier so that it could last longer.

Table 3. Students’ final comments and suggestions on eTandem.

The students’ comments reflect an overall positive experience with the eTandem project. Nevertheless, they also suggest areas for potential improvement. Their feedback highlights a general satisfaction with the structure and support provided during the project, indicating that the guidance and monitoring were appreciated and contributed to the project’s success. For instance, one student mentioned “I liked the project, as well as the fact that we were supported throughout its duration. I would definitely do it again” (1). This comment emphasises the value students attribute to continuous support and suggests that this aspect of the project should be maintained. However, students proposed starting the project earlier in the semester as in (9) “This project would be more helpful if it started earlier in the semester”, or extending its duration as in (10) “Perhaps the project could start a bit earlier so that it could

last longer”. These comments reflect the students’ desire for a more prolonged interaction period, which would allow them to build stronger relationships with their partners and achieve more substantial learning outcomes.

Another common theme is the need for more materials and specific learning objectives. One student expressed: “I believe it would be helpful to have some guidelines, topics to discuss based on language level, and suggestions for how to conduct the meetings in a way that achieves specific learning goals. Often, the meetings tend to be pleasant conversations which, although productive, do not always meet specific objectives” (3). This example indicates that while students enjoyed the informal nature of the conversations, they sometimes struggled to align the meetings with concrete learning goals. As a result, the inclusion of additional resources, such as suggested discussion topics or thematic guidelines, beyond those already provided, could better support students in achieving both their language and intercultural communication objectives.

## **6. Enhancing intercultural awareness through multimodal creativity**

One of the principal innovations introduced by the eTandem project is the inclusion of a final task that students are required to complete and upload to the *eTandem corner* by the end of their language and cultural exchange. Specifically, eTandem pairs were asked to collaborate in the creation of a joint multimodal product – such as short videos, PowerPoint presentations, or digital files with text and images – that not only summarised their learning journey but also highlighted their progresses from both a linguistic and cultural dimension, while underscoring the intercultural aspects and issues they encountered throughout their language exchanges. The final products feature various creative elements, such as visual comparisons, structured layouts, and the use of both written and visual narratives to present cultural and linguistic information. The dataset, comprising 15 final multimodal products, which have been transcribed and annotated, serves as the basis for analysing students’ multimodal creativity and investigating how this creativity may contribute to fostering intercultural communication and enhancing awareness between eTandem partners. By incorporating videos, sounds, images and texts students had the opportunity to engage in a further exploration and expression of cultural identities, compare traditions, and actively develop intercultural awareness.

The multimodal creativity displayed in these projects emerges through the varied ways in which students have exploited visuals, narrative styles, and formatting techniques to effectively convey their experiences. Their use of multimodal resources (Kress 2010) not only enriched the learning experience but also facilitated a more dynamic exchange of cultural perspectives. In relation to the use of multimodality, it is worth clarifying that, although this study does not aim to conduct an exhaustive multimodal analysis (Kress/van Leeuwen 2021) of the semiotic resources deployed in meaning-making processes, the present investigation has nonetheless evidenced that the integration of different modes and semiotic resources contributed to the enhancement of intercultural communication among participants. The interaction between different modes (text, images, and layout) played a crucial role in framing cultural content, guiding viewers through the narrative, and establishing relationships between elements.

To illustrate this further, Table 4 shows five products selected to provide an overview of the features characterising the multimodal artefacts produced by students in the eTandem project, including the type of text, the topics chosen, the strategies employed to address cultural issues, and the multimodal resources utilised to convey meaning.

<i>Type of text</i>	<i>Topics selected</i>	<i>Strategies employed to address cultural issues</i>	<i>Multimodal resources</i>
PPT Presentation	(1) Daily routines and cultural practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Addressing cultural stereotypes through comparison of daily routines</li> <li>- Highlighting similarities to bridge cultural gaps</li> </ul>	Text: Bilingual format for effective comparison Images: Pictures of daily activities Colours: Use of cultural colours for differentiation Typography: Consistent style for visual appeal
PPT Presentation	(2) Food Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus on specific regional dishes and their cultural significance. Addressing cultural stereotypes related to food and diet.</li> </ul>	Text: Alternating languages (English and Italian) Images: Photos of regional foods Layout: Organised with images complementing the text for each food item

<i>Type of text</i>	<i>Topics selected</i>	<i>Strategies employed to address cultural issues</i>	<i>Multimodal resources</i>
PDF	(3) Art and activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discussion on how art reflects cultural values and social issues</li> <li>- Personal insights on activism in art in both Italy and the U.S.</li> </ul>	Images: Art pieces and cultural symbols Text: Personal reflections on art Layout: Structured format with subtopics
PDF	(4) Christmas and Holiday Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Detailed comparison of Christmas celebrations in Italy and the U.S.</li> <li>- Discussing the commercialization of holidays.</li> </ul>	Text: Narratives on holiday customs Images: Photos of decorations and traditional foods Layout: Sequential presentation of cultural differences Typography: Bold for highlighting key points
PPT presentation	(5) Educational Systems and Holiday Traditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Comparison of academic structures and holiday celebrations.</li> <li>- Discussing cultural attitudes towards education and holidays</li> </ul>	Text: Side-by-side comparison of academic systems Images: Holiday icons and educational structures Layout: Well-organized to differentiate cultural content visually

Table 4. An overview of the features characterising the multimodal artefacts produced by students in the eTandem project.

As can be observed in Table 4, each product integrates text and images while employing layout and colours to make the content more engaging and accessible. The use of visual elements (e.g., food images, landmarks, holiday symbols, among others) complements textual descriptions creating a cohesive representation of cultural topics. Many of the projects feature bilingual texts, where English and Italian texts are juxtaposed to illustrate cultural and linguistic differences/similarities, enabling direct comparison and enhancing comprehension and awareness. The use

of colours, in particular, creates an immediate visual connection to the represented culture, reinforcing the cultural identity expressed through text and images. Colours function as semiotic modes (Kress/van Leeuwen 2002) that convey social meaning. For example, a number of students employed colours symbolically associated with specific cultural elements, such as the green, white, and red of the Italian flag or festive colours for Christmas – to symbolize national or holiday identities. For instance, one of the presentations employs colours to differentiate between Italian and American holiday celebrations. Additionally, the multimodal texts display structured layouts with distinct sections, making it easier to engage with the content, with images supporting the text for enhanced comprehension. The observation of the eTandem final multimodal products demonstrates how the strategic use of different semiotic elements can effectively communicate cultural and linguistic content. Through the combination of text, images, layout, and colours, the final products indeed enhance awareness of cultural differences and similarities, promoting intercultural comprehension and language acquisition. These artefacts serve as a medium not only for practicing language skills but also to express students' cultural identities and engage in meaningful intercultural dialogue.

## **7. Conclusive remarks and future developments**

The integration of digital educational environments with eTandem seems to be a promising strategy that promotes learner autonomy and enhances communication and intercultural dialogue among students. The students' perspective has highlighted that eTandem is viewed as an opportunity not only to enhance language skills but also to connect with peers from different cultures, enriching the overall learning experience. This study emphasised the role of a supportive environment which fosters collaborative engagement and facilitates communication across cultural boundaries. The exploration of students' final products showed that the combination of modes and semiotic resources has not only enriched the representation of cultural identities but has also facilitated a deeper exploration of cultural topics and intercultural awareness. Moreover, the use of LMS-based virtual spaces allows to expand communication between partners and peers beyond synchronous language exchanges, enabling them to interact through the asynchronous communicative tools made available in the *eTandem corner*.

Nevertheless, students' responses also highlighted the need for further implementation of the digital space, such as the creation of further tasks and activities to support students' who need greater guidance during their pathway towards autonomy. The research may further develop by analysing learning outcomes and focusing on self-assessment of linguistic and communicative objectives through learners' logs and structured interviews. Such in-depth analyses would provide insights into students' perceived progress and the overall impact of the project on their language proficiency, intercultural awareness, and autonomous learning skills.

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