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# The Role of Language Tandems in the Internationalization of University Curricula – Fostering Language Self-Efficacy, Cultural Intelligence, Learner Autonomy, and Intrinsic Goal Orientation

**Abstract**

The implementation and evaluation of innovative teaching concepts which promote intercultural competencies and foreign language skills, e.g. language tandems, are often underdeveloped at German universities. This outcome evaluation study investigated selected effects of participation in language tandems on the knowledge, skills and attitudes of participants. The hypothesis that language tandem participation fosters 'language self-efficacy, cultural intelligence, learner autonomy, and intrinsic goal orientation', was examined on a sample of 47 participants using pre-post-questionnaires. Results showed a significant improvement in participants' language self-efficacy and cultural intelligence.

**Keywords**

language tandem, language self-efficacy, cultural intelligence, learner autonomy, intrinsic goal orientation

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Scientific Contribution

# 1 Introduction

The need for increased internationalization of universities has been widely acknowledged by political decision makers and higher education professionals in Germany. The German Rectors' Conference (*Hochschulrektorenkonferenz* – HRK) developed the HRK-Audit "Internationalization of Universities" in 2009, and identified several fields of action for universities to implement as part of their respective individual internationalization strategies (HRK, 2014). Especially, enhancing German and foreign students' international mobility to broaden their academic, language and intercultural skills was recommended (HRK, 2014). While internationalization has been adopted by most German universities as an essential part of their strategic alignment, the response of students, domestic and foreign, to universities' internationalization strategies has lagged behind.

Current figures on student mobility indicate that the proportion of German students spending any time studying abroad is around 25% (DAAD & DZHW, 2017), a decrease of 5 percentage points from the previous measurement (DAAD & DZHW, 2014). Even for those students who spend time at a foreign university, the benefits with regards to their intercultural competencies have been called into question, as mere exposure to intercultural situations does not automatically lead to the development of aforementioned competencies (LEASK & BEELEN, 2009). In addition, recent research shows that foreign students in Germany are significantly more likely to drop out of their study programs than their German counterparts (HEUBLEIN et al., 2014). Insufficient German language skills and difficulties getting in contact with German students and German speakers outside the university setting are problematic for foreign students when trying to adapt to life in Germany (APOLINARSKI & POSKOWSKY, 2014). More specifically, foreign students often struggle with adjusting to their new academic environment's social and cultural norms (ZHOU & ZHANG, 2014).

Consequently, the pursued internationalization of university curricula requires further development and integration of educational offers which support international and domestic students in improving their foreign language skills and intercultural

competencies. Language tandems may be one solution to these curricular challenges. "Tandem language learning is a form of open learning in which two people with different mother tongues work together in order to learn one another's language", according to Little (1991, p.1). BRAMMERTS (2001) added to this definition that the aim of a language tandem is for both participants to improve their communication skills in their partner's native language, to learn more about their partner's cultural background, and profit from their partner's knowledge and experiences. While these general principles of language tandem learning have become accepted by the 'tandem community' (VASSALLO & TELLES, 2006), quantitative, empirical studies systematically investigating the potential effects of participation in language tandems on participants' skills and attitudes have rarely been realized.

The aim of this study was to evaluate the positive effects of language tandems on participants' competency development. To address the lack of quantitative studies in the field of language tandems, this study offers the following contributions: Firstly, it evaluates selected effects of prolonged participation (about four months) in a specific language tandem program. Secondly, it hypothesizes that 'language self-efficacy, cultural intelligence, learner autonomy, and intrinsic goal orientation' significantly increase over time (measurements t1 and t2). Thirdly, it shows the sensitivity of the applied instruments to measure competency development in language tandem participants.

# 2 Theoretical Background

## 2.1 Language Self-Efficacy (LSE)

Self-efficacy has been defined as an individual's "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (BANDURA, 1997, p. 3). Self-efficacy has been shown to be a better predictor of future performance than actual ability (BANDURA, 1997; SCHUNK, 1991). BANDURA (1986) asserted that self-efficacy is a task-specific construct, as one's

belief in one's capabilities depends on the context. RAOOFI and colleagues (2012) reviewed the findings of studies on self-efficacy within the context of second/foreign language learning and concluded that self-efficacy is highly predictable for foreign language performance. Language self-efficacy, i.e. the belief in one's ability to complete a communicative act in a (foreign) language, refers to competencies in the four basic language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), as well as in grammar (WONG, 2005). Increasing language self-efficacy has been shown to correlate positively with knowledge and usage of language learning strategies in a study of graduate pre-service teachers in East Asia (WONG, 2005), and with utilization of self-regulated learning strategies in a survey study of German and Chinese college students learning English (WANG et al., 2013). High use of learning strategies is connected to foreign language learning success (MACARO, 2006). Accordingly, we assume that participation in a language tandem positively improves participants' language self-efficacy over the course of the tandem program.

Hypothesis 1: Language Self–Efficacy increases significantly from t1 to t2.

## 2.2 Cultural Intelligence (CQ)

Cultural intelligence is defined as the capability of a person to manage and to function effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity, i.e. cross-/intercultural[2] settings and contexts (EARLEY & ANG, 2003). Measurement of intercultural competence has been an issue of longstanding debate and many intercultural models have been developed. In a recent review of 10 inter-cultural competence models, the CQ model was identified as among the most valid (based on content, construct, and ecological validity) and reliable measures, and as able to predict aspects of intercultural effectiveness (e.g., cultural adaption and task performance) using pre-post designs (MATSUMOTO & HWANG, 2013).

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[2] Cross-cultural competence and inter-cultural competence are used synonymously in the following.

Language tandems have long been purported as an effective method to further develop the intercultural skills of participants (CALVERT, 1999). The inherent structure of language tandems reportedly fosters exchange about cultural similarities and differences, as well as reflection upon one's own cultural norms and values (WOODIN, 2001). Therefore, we infer that language tandem participants will positively improve their cultural intelligence as a result of their participation in the tandem program.

Hypothesis 2: Cultural Intelligence increases significantly from t1 to t2.

## 2.3   Learner Autonomy (LA)

Over the past two decades, research into varying aspects of autonomous learning (BENSON, 2007) has resulted in the classroom implementation of more learner-centered approaches, e.g. task-based learning, content-based learning, action-based teaching. A central problem with 'learner autonomy' is an enduring terminological confusion surrounding the concept. While HOLEC's foundational definition of learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (1981, p. 3) remains the most widely recognized, a vast body of academic literature offers a range of differing interpretations of the term (see review by BENSON, 2011). These diverging definitions broadly have in common that an autonomous learner should be actively involved in and take responsibility for the various aspects (cognitively, meta-cognitively, affectively, and socially) of their learning process.

'Language learner autonomy' is understood as a concept in which "the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency are not only mutually supporting but fully integrated with each other" (LITTLE, 2007, p. 15). The author established 'learner involvement, learner reflection, and target language use' as the three fundamental principles of language learner autonomy. Language tandems have long been declared as particularly beneficial for the improvement of learner autonomy (LITTLE, 2001). The organizational structure of a language tandem forces participants to act autonomously with regards to when and where the learning occurs, and, most importantly, setting and evaluating their own

learning goals (BRAMMERTS, 2001). We consequently anticipate that the participation in a language tandem program will further develop the learner autonomy of participants.

Hypothesis 3: Learner Autonomy increases significantly from t1 to t2.

## 2.4 Intrinsic Goal Orientation (IGO)

Classically, motivation has been divided into extrinsic motivation, i.e., motivation stemming from a desired outcome, not connected to the activity itself and originating outside the individual, and intrinsic motivation, i.e. motivation originating from within an individual and which drives an individual to pursue learning for its own sake (DECI, 1975). Intrinsic motivation in particular has been shown to be positively linked to high-quality learning outcomes and creativity (RYAN & DECI, 2000). Newer research into motivation has shifted the conceptual focus from the initial dichotomy to a concentration on the content level, or the "what", of the pursued goals of an individual (VANSTEENKISTE et al., 2006). "The what of people's goals is addressed with the distinction between intrinsic versus extrinsic goals or goal contents" (VANSTEENKISTE et al., 2006, p. 22).

Fame, financial success, and physical appearance are extrinsic goals, and they orient towards the outside (VANSTEENKISTE et al., 2006). Intrinsic goals, which are targets that aim at personal growth, health, and social affiliations, are considered psychologically satisfying in themselves, as they address basic human needs (VANSTEENKISTE et al., 2006). An individual's intrinsic goal orientation has been found to be a determinant for positive subject-specific learning outcomes (e.g. CHYUNG et al., 2010), and for effective language learning strategies, and high academic achievement (BONNEY et al., 2007). Language tandems have been noted for their 'inherent motivation device' (VASSALLO & TELLES, 2006), i.e. tandem participants are motivated by the reciprocal learning relationship with the partner. Hence, we expect the intrinsic goal orientation of tandem participants to improve over the course of the program.

Hypothesis 4: Intrinsic Goal Orientation increases significantly from t1 to t2.

# 3 Methods

## 3.1 The Language Tandem Program (LTP)

The Language Tandem Program was first introduced as part of the portfolio of the Language Center at the *Technische Universität (TU) Braunschweig* (University of Brunswick – Institute of Technology), Germany in 2014. The aim of the program is to provide participants with a language learning offer which fosters foreign language skills, intercultural learning, and learner autonomy. While most participants are students enrolled in Bachelor and Master programs, the LTP is open to all members of the university (Ph.D. students, employees, etc.) and the wider community. Tandem partnerships are formed on a one-to-one basis. The native language of one partner has to be the foreign language the other partner is learning and vice versa.

The Language Tandem Program requires that participants meet their tandem partners at least 10 times over the course of a semester (about four months), for at least one hour, and spend half the time using each of the languages. Additionally, participants are required to attend three meetings with the tandem coordinator, whose role is to guide and support the learning process via feedback and reflection:

1. a "tandem partner exchange" (*Tandembörse*), the initial meeting in which the LTP is explained, participants choose their tandem partner, and sign a learning agreement together. Part of the agreement is that each partner is instructed to set themselves an individual learning goal (or goals) which they wish to pursue and accomplish through the language tandem;

2. a learning advisory session with the tandem coordinator (and the partner) – after the tandem pair has had three meetings – in which the partners are guided to reflect on their tandem experience thus far, to evaluate how well they have met their learning goals, and to identify resources and activities which they can use in their subsequent meetings;

3. a closing event with all tandem pairs of the semester, in which participants can reflect on their tandem learning experience, give feedback to the tan-

dem coordinator, evaluate the LTP, and get in contact with other local and international students at the university.

Participants have to document all their meetings (those as a pair and those with the coordinator) in a logbook, which includes two specific sections that are aimed at fostering learner autonomy. In the first of these sections, each participant is asked to set themselves a learning exercise or activity for the particular meeting (planning of learning); in the second, participants are asked to note down what they gained from the meeting (reflection on learning). For the tandem program's successful completion, a certificate of participation without ECTS-points is awarded.

## 3.2 Participants

At the program beginning (i.e. the *Tandembörse*), the participants who had found a matching tandem partner were asked to voluntarily answer a paper-pencil questionnaire (t1), provided in both English and German, to evaluate themselves. The tandem participants were again questioned during the closing event (t2). Questionnaire data was collected from participants in the summer semester 2016 and the winter semester 2016/17. In total, 171 participants filled out the pre-questionnaire. The post-questionnaire was answered by 47 participants, 23 (48.9 %) were women and 24 (51.1 %) men. The large discrepancies between the completions of pre- and post-questionnaire may appear high, however, experience suggests this number not to be unusual in voluntarily or non-credit-bearing programs. On average, the 47 participants who completed both questionnaires were 24.60 years old (SD = 4.67) at the beginning of the study. 37 (78.7 %) were university students and the other 10 participants (21.3 %) were either university employees or external participants. 26 participants (55.3 %) spoke German as their native language, and 21 (44.7 %) participants had a native language other than German.

Table 1:  Absolute and percentage numbers of participants
in language combinations

| Language combination | Number of participants (N) | Percentage of the sample (%) |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| English-German | 16 | 34.0 |
| French-German | 12 | 25.5 |
| Chinese-German | 11 | 23.4 |
| Spanish-German | 5 | 10.6 |
| Portuguese-German | 2 | 4.3 |
| Italian-German | 1 | 2.1 |

Notes: Not all participants were able or willing to complete the voluntary pre-post-questionnaires. Thus, in some cases, the data from a single tandem partner was collected.

## 3.3   Variables/Measures

All the scales were originally worded in English. A German language version was developed using BRISLIN's (1970) classic back-translation method. For this study, three native speakers of German translated the scales into German, and three English native speakers translated the compiled German version back into English. Participants were asked to rate each statement of the cultural intelligence, learner autonomy, and intrinsic goal orientation scale on a 6-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). For language self-efficacy, participants indicated how confident they were to fulfil each task without error on a 10-point Likert scale, from 1 (not confident at all) to 10 (completely confident). The particular scales were selected, based on the author's professional experience, as they

appeared to provide the most adequate instruments to measure the hypothesized effects of language tandem participation on competency development.

*Language Self-Efficacy:*

To measure language self-efficacy, we used a modified version of a scale developed by Wong (2005). The original scale had to be adapted to the particular context of the Language Tandem Program, and items were rephrased or removed accordingly. The modified instrument used in this study included the following seven items: "Write an essay of about 400 words in length on what you did during your last holidays"; "Explain to somebody unfamiliar with your studies the structure of your study program"; "Share with a friend what happened during the most memorable day in your life"; "Take notes while listening to an audio file about typical jobs in a country of which you are learning the foreign language"; "Give a presentation on an academic topic in front of a class"; and "Read out loud a travel report in front of your class mates". The original 10-item language self-efficacy scale had an internal consistency value of $\alpha = 0.89$.

*Cultural Intelligence:*

ANG et al.'s 20-item Cultural Intelligence Scale (2007) was applied in the measurement of participants' cultural intelligence. A sample item was: "I am conscious of the cultural knowledge I use when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds". The alpha coefficient for the entire scale was above $\alpha = 0.70$ in the original study.

*Learner Autonomy:*

Learner autonomy was measured with MACSKILL & TAYLOR's 12-item Autonomous Learning Scale (2010). "I enjoy new learning experiences" is one of the items of the ALS. In the original study, the alpha coefficient was $\alpha = 0.81$.

*Intrinsic Goal Orientation:*

To measure the intrinsic goal orientation of tandem participants, an adapted version of the 4-item intrinsic goal orientation sub-scale from PINTRICH et al.'s Motivat-

ed Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (1991) was employed. The original scale was developed to measure the intrinsic goal orientation within a particular course. Therefore, the authors used "course material" and "opportunities in this class" in their items. We adapted the items to fit the context of language tandems by changing the wording. Instead of "course material" we used the more general "class work" in our study. An example item is: "I prefer class work that is challenging so I can learn new things". PINTRICH et al. (1991) stated an internal consistency value for intrinsic goal orientation of $\alpha= 0.74$.

# 4   Data Analyses

Two-sample t-tests for baseline characteristics (t1) were used to ensure that the samples from the summer 2016 and the winter semester 2016/17 were comparable. Descriptive statistics for the sample characteristics, bivariate Pearson coefficients for correlations between main outcome parameters, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient as an index of internal consistency (reliability) for the applied scale measures were calculated. To test for statistical significance, the mean differences between t1 and t2 were analyzed using paired sample t-tests for all four variables (see BORTZ & SCHUSTER, 2010, for details on the principles of the methods of analyses). The software SPSS (Version 24.0) was used for all analyses.

# 5   Results

## 5.1   Analysis of the sample

No significant differences were found between the participants ($N = 26$) from the summer semester (SS) and the participants ($N = 21$) of the winter semester (WS), regarding the four target variables (LSE, CQ, LA, IGO; at baseline/t1), as well as sex, age, pursued university degree, and German native speaker vs. non-native speaker of German, other than their mean age (SS: $M = 23.00$; WS: $M = 26.57$;

T(45) = -2.79, p < .05). Likewise, no significant differences concerning the afore-mentioned measures were found between the participants who filled out only the pre-questionnaire (t1) and those who completed both (t1/t2). However, six of the 47 participant responses were excluded from the analysis, as they had missing values in the observed variables (SCHLOMER et al., 2010).

## 5.2 Descriptive statistics, inter-scale correlations and internal consistency

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of variables are summarized in Table 1. The mean scores numerically increased from pre-test to post-test for all four variables. Discrepancies between t1 and t2 Cronbach's Alphas in Learner Autonomy and Intrinsic Goal Orientation are appreciable.

Table 2:  Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach's Alphas, and Bivariate Pearson Correlations for language self-efficacy, cultural intelligence, learner autonomy, and intrinsic goal orientation for 41 participants

| | Measures | | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Language Self-Efficacy | t1 | 5.80 | 1.91 | (.89) | .741*** | .259$^+$ | -.112 | .266+ | .064 | .353* | .022 |
| 2 | Language Self-Efficacy | t2 | 6.57 | 2.17 | | (.92) | .204 | .184 | .312* | .195 | .330* | .008 |
| 3 | Cultural Intelligence | t1 | 4.27 | 0.63 | | | (.90) | .344* | .573*** | .201 | .551*** | .011 |
| 4 | Cultural Intelligence | t2 | 4.55 | 0.45 | | | | (.86) | .218 | .463** | .085 | .238 |
| 5 | Learner Autonomy | t1 | 4.33 | 0.61 | | | | | (.85) | .504*** | .615*** | .198 |
| 6 | Learner Autonomy | t2 | 4.43 | 0.49 | | | | | | (.64) | .225 | .453** |
| 7 | Intrinsic Goal Orientation | t1 | 4.49 | 0.91 | | | | | | | (.78) | .460** |
| 8 | Intrinsic Goal Orientation | t2 | 4.77 | 0.69 | | | | | | | | (.62) |

Notes: Cronbach's alphas, presented in the diagonal (..); M, mean; SD, standard deviation. $_+p < .10$ (two-tailed). *p < .05 (two-tailed). **p < .01 (two-tailed). ***p < .000 (two-tailed).

## 5.3 Hypothesis Testing

The results of the paired sample t-tests show that language self-efficacy (Hypothesis 1) and cultural intelligence (Hypothesis 2) of the participants increased significantly from t1 to t2 (LSE: $T(40) = -3.57$, p = .001; CQ: $T(40) = -3.27$, p = .002). The improvement from t1 to t2 in intrinsic goal orientation (Hypothesis 4) was marginally significant ($T(40) = -1.94$, p = .059). The hypothesized increase in learner autonomy over time (Hypothesis 3) did not reach statistical significance ($T(40) = -1.13$, p = .265).

# 6   Discussion

The main objective of the presented evaluation study was to measure the effect of language tandem participation on the development of specific competencies (i.e., language self-efficacy, cultural intelligence, learner autonomy, and intrinsic goal orientation), using a pre-post-design. Moreover, we aimed to show the applicability of the instruments to measure competency development in language tandem participants.

Following a preliminary and exploratory approach using quantitative data collection and statistical analyses, our results offer further insight into the competency development of language tandem participants. The findings may also be generalizable, as they were gathered from a sample of university students, university employees, and participants without a university association.

In line with the literature, we found a statistically significant improvement in participants' language self-efficacy (WANG et al., 2013) and cultural intelligence (CALVERT, 1999) over the course of their participation in the Language Tandem Program (LTP). Language tandems can thus be considered a suitable addition to the internationalization of university curricula, as they appear to enhance intercultural competencies and foreign language abilities (WONG, 2005).

No statistically significant changes were observed in the intrinsic goal orientation (VASALLO & TELLES, 2006) and in learner autonomy (LITTLE, 2001) of language tandem participants. A possible explanation could lie in the structure and organization of the LTP itself: It can be assumed that the typical participant in a language tandem program already possesses above-average levels of intrinsic goal orientation and learner autonomy, as the program does not entail ECTS-points for its completion or predefined learning goals. Thus, the lack of statistically significant change in these variables may be indicative of ceiling effects.

The questionnaires showed good applicability in the practical implementation of the study. At least for the language self-efficacy and cultural intelligence scales, they appeared to be viable and sensitive measures to determine changes in language tandem participants' competencies.

## 6.1   Limitations of the Study & Future Research

There are several limitations to the presented study. First, the substantial disparity in the sample sizes between those who began a language tandem and those who completed the LTP is noteworthy. As hardly any differences were found between these two groups, we can only speculate about factors which contributed or lead to early drop-out. Future research into language tandem learning should attempt to carefully evaluate causes of this phenomenon.

Second, we also recommend to include one or more control groups, to rule out that the measured changes occur naturally or due to non-controlled intervening variables over time. Investigations focusing on the mechanisms and determinants of the learning process within language tandems also seem very important. A recent study, e.g., encouraged the use and further development of learning journals, portfolios, and logbooks in language tandem programs for purposes of reflection on the learning process (BRÖCKER & KLEPPIN, 2017).

Third, the evident discrepancies in Cronbach's alphas between the t1 and t2 measure, specifically in learner autonomy and intrinsic goal orientation, need to be discussed. These findings may reflect an underlying dilemma with the languages

(English and German) in which the variables were presented. Although great care was taken in the back-and-forth translation process of the four English language scales, we cannot rule out potential problems with comprehensibility due to imprecisions. More significantly, a considerable number of participants had to complete the questionnaire in a foreign language (N=12), as it was unfeasible to have the items translated into all potential native languages that may occur in the LPT.

Future research into language tandem learning should aim to measure actual foreign language competency in relation to language self-efficacy. Even though a positive correlation between self-efficacy and elements of language learning has been found (e.g., WONG, 2005), a similar comparison study focusing on these parameters may further elucidate and corroborate suggested benefits of language tandems on foreign language ability.

Variation in baseline characteristics between native speaker groups may have also impacted the investigated outcome parameters. Study circumstances did not allow for a more detailed consideration of these variables, and should be included in the future.

# 7    Conclusions

In sum, and regarding its limitations, the findings of this study provide preliminary empirical support for the long-held assumption that language tandems have a beneficial effect on the competency development of their participants. The statistically significant improvements observed in language self-efficacy and cultural intelligence should encourage the language tandem community to further investigate effects and outcomes of its programs, and decision-makers in higher education to lobby for the inclusion of language tandem programs into university curricula.

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