



The Experience of Using Tandem Language Learning in Professional Higher Education

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a series of subject and language-training tandem projects aimed at teaching adult learners how to respond to emergency situations in Estonian and Russian. The study discusses the effectiveness of using simulations in language-training for emergency response. Participants from three universities of applied sciences, including Tallinn Healthcare College, Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, and Tallinn University of Applied Sciences, were involved in the language projects conducted between 2018 and 2023. The projects employed a tandem approach, pairing learners with native speakers to enhance their foreign language skills. Simulations were used to provide a realistic and immersive learning experience for the participants.

Keywords: *adult learners, tandem language learning, integrated subject and language learning, emergency, immersion*

1. Introduction

In the context of last year's crisis and prevailing social and political uncertainties, the development of professional skills and the ability to respond appropriately in crisis situations have become paramount for students studying socially significant specialties such as healthcare and law enforcement. Alongside language learning, these students face the challenge of acquiring the necessary linguistic proficiency to communicate effectively in their professional environments. As a result, there is a growing need for pragmatic and effective methods of teaching non-native languages for specific professional purposes. This paper aims to share the experience of implementing the tandem method of language learning within the framework of teaching Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) in professional higher education. Specifically, it explores the effectiveness of using simulations as part of language training to enhance learners' ability to respond to emergency situations.

Given the current socio-political climate and the urgent need for professionals to possess both linguistic proficiency and crisis response skills, the tandem method of language learning, coupled with simulation-based training, emerges as a pragmatic and effective approach within the context of LSP instruction. This paper presents the advantages and necessity of utilizing the tandem method to address the specific language needs of students pursuing socially significant professions. By incorporating simulations and group-based training, this approach enables learners to develop the necessary professional skills and effectively respond to crisis situations while learning a non-native language. Overall, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on language education by highlighting the value of the tandem method and simulations in teaching non-native languages for specific professional purposes. It provides practical insights into the implementation of this approach and underscores its significance in the context of professional higher education.



The tandem language learning projects conducted from 2018 to 2023 involved learners from three universities of applied sciences: Tallinn Healthcare College, Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, and Tallinn University of Applied Sciences. These projects employed a tandem approach, pairing learners with native speakers to enhance their foreign language skills. The simulations utilized in these projects provided participants with a realistic and immersive learning experience. The results demonstrated a significant improvement in the participants' ability to effectively respond to emergency situations in both Estonian and Russian languages.

2. The theoretical and methodological background of the projects

Tandem learning has been recognized by researchers as a prominent approach in the field of education, primarily utilized to facilitate the language acquisition process among students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds [see 1-5]. This method has gained significant recognition within the framework of inter-student exchange programs, including international collaborations, owing to its remarkable effectiveness in enhancing proficiency in the target language, as well as fostering an understanding of its intricacies and cultural nuances. At its core, tandem learning involves a partnership between two students, typically from different cultural and linguistic communities, who engage in reciprocal language learning and practice. This collaborative arrangement allows participants to assume the roles of both a learner and a teacher, with each individual sharing their respective native language with their tandem partner. Through regular interaction and structured language exchange activities, learners gain exposure to authentic communication contexts, enabling them to develop a comprehensive understanding of the studied language and its associated cultural patterns.

Moreover, the reciprocal nature of tandem learning ensures a balanced exchange of knowledge and expertise between the participants. As learners take turns assuming the roles of both a student and a teacher, they benefit from the unique perspectives and insights offered by their tandem partner. As observed by A. Healey, tandem language learning sessions create low-anxiety learning environments that resemble the process of acquiring a first language [4, 6]. This dynamic interaction fosters mutual support and encourages a cooperative learning environment, where students can actively engage in constructive feedback, correction, and clarification. M.-T. Batardière and C. Jeanneau emphasize that through collaborative navigation of the challenges associated with language acquisition, learners develop a profound sense of ownership and responsibility for their own learning. This process subsequently reinforces their motivation and self-confidence [3].

3. The tandem language learning in practice

Participants in the projects included language trainers (Estonian and Russian), specialty trainers (lecturers teaching first aid), and tour guides (conducting guided tours in a museum). The project involved students from three universities of applied sciences: police service cadets from the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, nurses, care workers, and paramedics from the Tallinn Health Care College, and social workers and engineers from the Tallinn University of Applied Sciences. During the period from 2018 to 2023, the participation of students in the projects varied as follows:

- in 2018, there were 44 students (7 native-speaking Russian + 37 native-speaking Estonian participants) involved, and language cafes were conducted;
- in 2022, the number of participants increased to 48 (14 native-speaking Russian + 34 native-speaking Estonian participants), and a tandem language learning camp was organized;
- in 2023, the project expanded further, with a total of 60 (27 native-speaking Ukrainian and Russian + 33 native-speaking Estonian participants) students taking part in online and onsite language classes, individual work, and a tandem language learning camp.



The students' language proficiency levels exhibited diversity within the project. Some had a basic level of proficiency in the Russian language, while others demonstrated basic to intermediate proficiency in Estonian. Additionally, bilingual students also participated, bringing their unique language skills to the project.

The tandem approach was employed in all language projects conducted between 2018 and 2023. These projects encompassed a variety of activities and formats, including language cafes, tandem language learning camps, online and onsite language classes, individual work, and bilingual guided tours. The goals of these projects were multifaceted. Firstly, they aimed to overcome the language barrier in both Estonian and Russian by utilizing the tandem language learning method. Secondly, the projects sought to enhance students' ability to effectively communicate in work-related situations in both Russian and Estonian languages. Furthermore, the projects aimed to foster interdisciplinary collaboration between police cadets, engineering, social work, nursing, paramedic and care work students, while also cultivating the participants' professional and language skills.

The topics and activities during the tandem language projects encompassed a range of professional and linguistic knowledge and skills. These included reacting adequately in crisis situations, communicating effectively in both languages with difficult clients, providing instructions on administering first aid, engaging in work-related communication such as describing a person's appearance, asking and giving directions.

Based on student feedback and study [7] improvements were made to the projects over time, including incorporating more general language, changing the venue, increasing the volume of classes, adding more topics and active learning opportunities, and conducting additional language practice. The current year's project, titled "Providing First Aid 2023", implemented these enhancements and featured a combination of auditory and online classes, individual work on Moodle, and tandem learning activities focusing on personal data and description, giving directions and offering assistance, and first aid terminology.

The culmination of the project was a tandem language learning camp held at the Kukruse Polar Manor in northeastern Estonia, known for its intriguing exposition about the manor's former owner, the world-famous polar explorer Eduard von Toll. The language camp spanned two days. On the first day, participants engaged in a guided tour and teamwork. In group activities, students were tasked with various assignments, including sharing personal stories that encompassed their interests, leisure activities, and physical appearance. They also practiced giving and following instructions in Estonian and Russian through a treasure hunt-like game, utilizing the vocabulary they had acquired. The second day focused on specialized training in both languages and collaborative problem-solving of work-related scenarios, culminating in presentations. Following the activities, students received feedback from both specialty trainers and language instructors. Additionally, students provided their own feedback regarding all aspects of the project.

The final assignment of the 2023 project involved tandem activities in both the specialty and language domains, and it encompassed assessing the casualty's condition and communication, making simulated emergency calls, communicating with the "emergency center", and applying first aid techniques for situations such as stroke, allergies, loss of consciousness, various types of wounds, fractures, and hypothermia. The first aid activities included conducting consciousness checks, performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) through chest compressions, utilizing an automated external defibrillator (AED) to manage life-threatening cardiac arrhythmias, and providing wound treatment.



To summarize, additional language training was provided through tandem learning, utilizing active and problem-based learning methods. Tasks were completed individually, in pairs, and in groups, with group discussions and role-plays incorporated. Student feedback on this year's project was inspiring, with positive assessments of features such as the immersive and challenging language out-of-comfort-zone active language learning environment, networking opportunities, and work-related simulations. Students also provided suggestions for improvement, such as extending the duration of the projects and ensuring an equal number of native-speakers of Estonian and Russian.

Conclusion

Through the use of tandem language learning, the students in the projects successfully overcame the language barrier and significantly improved their foreign language communication and collaboration skills, and practiced professional skills in real-life scenarios. The outcomes of the language projects demonstrated the tangible benefits of incorporating tandem learning and simulations into professional education.

The positive results of the projects, including students' outcomes and gathered feedback, validate the effectiveness of the tandem language learning approach. It is essential to highlight the importance of creating near-authentic environments that allow students to engage with their professional tasks and develop the necessary language skills. The advantages and necessity of utilizing the tandem method within LSP instruction are evident, with simulations proving to be a valuable tool for language teachers. Motivation and the benefits derived from practical training scenarios should be emphasized.

The incorporation of simulations throughout the language-learning events emphasized the significance of practical scenarios in language education. This approach not only facilitated the students' ability to overcome language barriers but also provided them with a supportive environment to confidently speak a foreign language without the fear of making mistakes, thereby highlighting the advantages of tandem language training.

In conclusion, the shared experience in this paper demonstrates the value of tandem language learning and the integration of simulations in teaching non-native languages for specific professional purposes. By adopting this approach, educators can better equip students with the language skills and competencies required for their future careers, enabling them to effectively respond to crisis situations and excel in their respective fields. The experience of using tandem learning in the LSP opens up further discussions and opportunities for the development and integration of the tandem learning method in professional higher education, benefiting both students and language instructors.

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