

The Effect of Relationships on Student Perseverance in Face-to-face and Online Tandem Programmes

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Abstract

A language exchange program (LEX) is conducted each semester on campus at a Japanese university, but the lack of partners who speak languages other than Japanese is an issue. To address this problem, we plan to create an international online language exchange program so that Japanese students can interact with a broader range and greater number of students, thus helping them to improve their language skills and overseas students to improve their Japanese communication skills. Previous research found that social factors were more significant in maintaining student motivation to continue a face-to-face LEX program than language learning factors. Therefore, this study aimed to compare the factors that motivated students to continue their tandem in face-to-face and online tandem programmes and to ascertain what factors might encourage students to continue a tandem in an online setting. We surveyed two groups of students: one on a face-to-face LEX programme, and the other on an international online programme. The latter was followed up by face-to-face interviews. Responses to questions, including why they did or did not continue on the programme, perceived differences between doing the programme face-to-face or online, as well as interview transcripts, were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. It was found that in both programmes, factors affecting students' decisions to continue on a tandem programme were related to both improvement in the target language and to social factors such as the relationship between partners, but for face-to-face tandem programmes, social factors appeared to outweigh language gains as motivating factors. Additionally, valuable insights on ways of approaching online exchange programme development have been gained from the experience of the online participants and the concerns expressed by the face-to-face participants with regard to interacting online.

Key Words:

Language Exchange, Online Intercultural Exchange, Perseverance on Tandem Programmes

1. Introduction

As in other universities in Japan, many Japanese students at Chiba University are keen to improve their linguistic competence in English or another language but are either limited in the number of language classes they can take each year or cannot take classes in their target language. Equally, many international students wish to improve their Japanese competence but need more time or opportunity to develop their skills. For such students, the university self-access centre, English House (EH), has conducted a ten-week, face-to-face language exchange programme (LEX) each semester since 2017. EH accepts applications to join the programme, and matches them using criteria including target language, interests, and reasons for joining the programme. Following an orientation, participants meet each other once a week for approximately an hour, and ideally spend 30 minutes in each of the target languages. However, unfortunately, many students are not able to be placed with a partner. In the autumn/winter semester of 2023, 200 out of 300 applicants were successfully matched with a total of 11 target languages being studied.

In the same semester, Chiba University was invited to join a programme run by Heinrich Heine University (HH) in Germany called euroTandem (Heinrich Heine University, 2024). This programme offers a similar tandem exchange with Japanese students wishing to improve their German partnering German students learning Japanese. The programme was necessarily online and involved 12 synchronous video link sessions. Ten students, who were not involved with the LEX programme, were recruited from Chiba University

As EH is planning to expand the scope of the LEX programme to include more online opportunities to interact with students at overseas universities, this was an opportunity to discover whether students on an online programme would be as likely to continue with their programme as students on a face-to-face programme and what factors might affect that continuance or non-continuance. Previous research (Morikawa, 2023) has suggested that social factors such as relationships between the partners and having fun were more dominant reasons why students continue a face-to-face LEX programme than language-learning factors. Additionally, in the same 2023 study, how well students “got on with” their partners appeared to strongly influence their motivation to study the target language. We investigated whether the same might be true of an online programme.

Research questions

1. What factors motivated students to continue their tandem in face-to-face and online tandem programmes and did these factors differ?
2. What factors might encourage students to continue a tandem in an online setting.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Tandem Principles

Tandem learning is a partnership in which two people who speak different languages assist their partner to learn each other's language. Tandem is not a new system. "Two people with different native languages teaming up to learn each other's language is certainly one of the oldest learning methods in the world", (Brammerts, 1996, p. 121). More recently, tandem has developed alongside technology from face-to-face learning partnerships to etandem projects using email writing, Teletandem (Vassallo and Telles, 2006) and Online Intercultural Exchange (Tardieu and Horgues, 2020). Especially in the earlier projects, accepted common principles of tandem learning were autonomy, reciprocity and authenticity (Brammerts, 1996; Vassallo and Telles, 2006).

2.1.1 Autonomy

Autonomy is the "capacity to take control of one's own learning" (Benson, 2011, p. 58). Capacity has three elements: *freedom*, or how far learners are permitted to control their learning; *ability*, or the skills to acquire language; and *desire*, or the intention to learn (Huang & Benson, 2013). In a tandem program, students are able to decide by themselves their goals, methods, materials, and pace, and within the constraints of the context, for example, time constraints, they are free to control their own learning. There is no teacher oversight or instruction beyond the initial provision of an advice manual. By working with a partner with a different language background and learning history, students may develop a wider range of strategies and skills to develop their target language. Further, by voluntarily participating in the tandem program, they have already demonstrated an intention to learn. Added to this, Murray (2016, p. 4) states that "individuals can only be autonomous in relation to some social context" and that students will learn not only from oral interaction, but also from "observation of demeanor and behaviour.". Students can interact with their language partner and choose to digress during their oral interaction to new ideas or information and enquire about any aspect of their partner's behaviour or individual culture they find interesting. In short, participants are free to choose what they want to do in tandem with their partner.

2.1.2 Reciprocity

Tandem programmes are reciprocal in that students should spend equal time on each language. For example, for partners learning Japanese and Chinese, half of the meeting time should be spent speaking solely Japanese and the other half should be solely in Chinese. This ensures that each participant has equal status as an “expert” and as a learner. The relationship is not “asymmetrical” in the same way an online lesson might be with one person in a position to evaluate or judge performance as a teacher. Therefore, there is no power imbalance, but rather learner support (Vassallo & Telles, 2006). There is also reciprocity in that partners are encouraged to prepare by considering their partner’s goals and how best to help them attain those goals before participating in each session. It has been found that partners encourage each other to prepare more thoroughly as one emulates the amount of effort expended by the other (Morikawa, 2023). On the other hand, strict compliance with a 50/50 approach is not always adhered to, with some tandem partnerships opting for a lingua franca approach. In a systematic review of telecollaboration publications (Lewis & O’Dowd, 2016) 6 out of 54 studies involved partners using a lingua franca to assist their partner. This is understandable if the partners are at a low level in their target language but both speak the same third language. However, even in these partnerships, both partners should have equal chances to address their goals and equal authority in their relationship.

2.1.3 Authenticity

Tandem programmes are an excellent source of authentic language input for students. During a tandem session, the conversation is authentic, with the target language being spoken for 30 minutes, discussing topics of interest to both participants and not using a textbook or externally produced teaching materials. Even if a textbook is used, the pragmatics of the situation will demand authentic language use, for example, dealing with misunderstandings, asking questions, or for clarification, and arranging the next meeting. Traditionally, tandem programmes call for partners to be native speakers of target languages. According to Woodin (2020, p. 32), tandem learning is often described as “learning which takes place when native speakers of one language meet with native speakers of another language to learn and help each other learn.” This provides authentic input and advice from peers who have lived a language and culture. On the other hand, there has been a more recent shift towards “competent speaker” rather than “native speaker,” along with the shift from language focus to intercultural competence (Tardieu & Hogues, 2020). However, this should not diminish authenticity. It merely provides a different form of authentic communication between speakers of different languages.

3. Method

3.1 The tandem programmes

This paper investigates two tandem projects: the language exchange programme (LEX), a face-to-face tandem programme at Chiba University, and the euroTandem programme established by Heinrich Heine University. This section will give an overview of the features of these programmes, participants and the recruitment process, the survey instrument, and how the results were analyzed. Table 1 shows the main features of each program.

Table 1. Comparison of features of the LEX and euroTandem programmes

Language Exchange Programme	euroTandem
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chiba University survey respondents (n=110/200 participants) • Face-to-face on campus (online option) • 10 weeks • One hour per week • Teach own, or second language to each other • 50: 50 in each language specified • Competent or L1 speakers • No credit or certificate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chiba University survey respondents (n=5/10 participants) • Online (free choice of platform) • 12 sessions • Recommended 1hour per week • Teach own language to each other • 50: 50 in each language specified • L1 speakers • Certificate of completion

3.2 Participants

Participants in this study from the LEX programme were 110 Japanese and international students studying at Chiba University. See Table 2 for details. From the euroTandem program, participants comprised the 5 students studying German as a third language who responded to the survey. Their partners were 5 German students studying Japanese at Heinrich Heine University. These students were unable to participate in the survey as there was no access to their personal details.

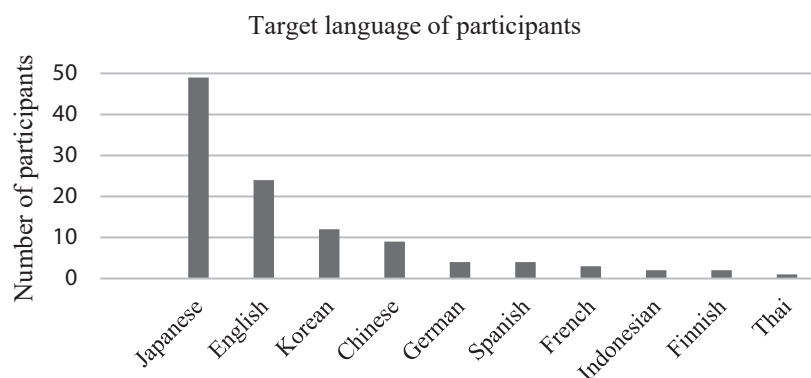
3.3 Recruitment

For the LEX programme, participants were recruited by posters on various notice-boards around the university and at the self-access centre of Chiba U, by group email with the cooperation of the International Student Division, by word-of-mouth, and by short oral introductions at guidance meetings for new international students with the

Table 2. Breakdown of LEX respondents' year or level of study. (n=110)

Year or level of study	Number of respondents	Year or level of study	Number of respondents
1st year	22	Masters	7
2nd year	17	Doctoral	8
3rd year	9	Exchange	25
4th year	18	Research	2
5th year	1	Teacher training	1

Figure 1. The number of LEX respondents learning each target language.



cooperation of the Centre for International Education. Students completed a Google application form giving information about their own language, target language, level of language, department, year, reasons for learning the target language, interests, availability, and whether they would like to do the LEX programme face-to-face or online.

After the closing date, the applications were analysed and sorted into prospective pairings, taking into account the various factors with the following priority: Target language, Availability, Interests + level of detail and effort made in describing interests and self-introductions, Reasons for learning, Differences in age and language level.

Students were then paired with their tandem partner. In some cases, students had two separate partners as some target languages were more popular than others. See Figure 1 for target language information. In other cases, mostly Japanese students looking for English-speaking partners, no partner was found, and those students could not participate in the program that semester. The students attended an orientation meeting to meet their partners, discuss their language learning goals, and arrange their first meeting. They were also introduced to the main principles of tandem and some possible approaches to their sessions such as using a personal learning plan template to

outline their overall aims for the programme and possible aims for each week's session, as well as what they would like their partner to do to help; the kind of preparation that could be done to make sure sessions go smoothly, what could be done if a student wanted to focus on language learning or cultural information exchange and where students might find helpful materials. Students were also encouraged to form language groups, for example, all the Korean/Japanese pairs, and meet occasionally to exchange ideas and experiences. After the meeting, the LEX program started, and the author made no more contact with participants unless a problem with a missing partner arose, until the end of the program when the feedback questionnaire was administered by Google form.

For the euroTandem programme, recruitment was conducted in Chiba University by poster and by asking teachers of German to advertise the opportunity in their classrooms. A guidance meeting was held and students were directed to the euroTandem website to register their interest in applying to the programme. The pairing was conducted by HH University as was the online orientation. At this time, students were given an explanation of the programme and were asked to contact their partners by themselves. Students did so and continued their exchange autonomously.

3.4 Survey Instrument

At the end of the LEX programme, participants were asked to respond to a Google form questionnaire, including questions related to personal information, details about their sessions, what they did in their sessions, perceived language improvements, reasons why they continued or did not continue the programme to the end, their views about doing the LEX programme online and multiple choice questions about the effectiveness of the LEX programme. With regard to the euroTandem program, this research took place before the programme was completed as there were some issues with partner matching and a deadline that needed to be met. However, a similar survey was distributed to assess the students' willingness to continue the programme and the factors affecting this willingness two-thirds of the way through the programme. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with the Japanese participants to gain a deeper understanding of their feelings.

3.5 Analysis

Responses were collected and Japanese responses were translated into English using translation software and then checked individually. The responses to open questions regarding improvement in the target language, what students did in their programme,

their relationship with their partner, reasons why they did or did not continue on the programme and perceived differences between doing the programme face-to-face or online were analysed using an abbreviated grounded theory approach, also known as “grounded theory lite” (Delve and Limpaecher, 2021. Grounded theory lite section) for each of the questions. This is a less rigorous variation of a grounded theory approach, often used in small exploratory projects such as this one. With this approach, rather than fitting the data into hypothetical categories, the data was coded, i.e. descriptive labels were attached to each response, and those that shared characteristics were grouped together to form a collection of categories of factors that motivated students to continue in a tandem derived directly from the data, which can be used in future investigations.

For the euroTandem participants, the survey was conducted in the same way and followed by semi-structured interviews to gain more insight into what the students were doing in their tandem sessions and why they were continuing their programme. Transcriptions of the interviews were translated where necessary and a grounded theory approach was adopted for all responses.

4. Results

This study investigated factors that motivated students to continue their tandem in face-to-face and online tandem programmes, whether these factors differ, and what factors need to be addressed in order to encourage students to continue a tandem in an online setting.

Research Question Q1. What factors motivated students to continue their tandem in face-to-face and online tandem programmes and did these factors differ?

4.1 Face-to-face LEX

As shown in Figure 2, it appears that general satisfaction among the respondents was high regarding usefulness for learning a language, motivation to study a target language and recommendations to friends.

Using a Grounded Theory approach, responses from the LEX participants (n=76) to the item “Please tell us the main reason why you continued to meet your partner” were categorised into 16 categories. These categories were grouped into the following seven categories listed in order of frequency of mention: fun, language learning, relationship with partner, learning about culture, features of partner, practicalities, and obligation. Figure 3 shows how frequently each of these categories were mentioned.

Figure 2. Respondent satisfaction on the 2023/2024 Autumn/Winter semester LEX programme

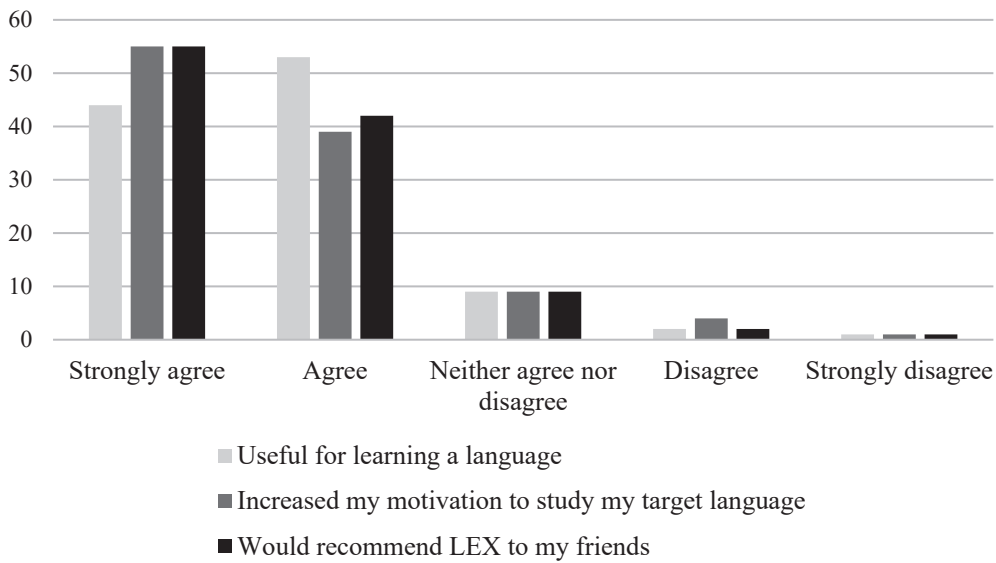
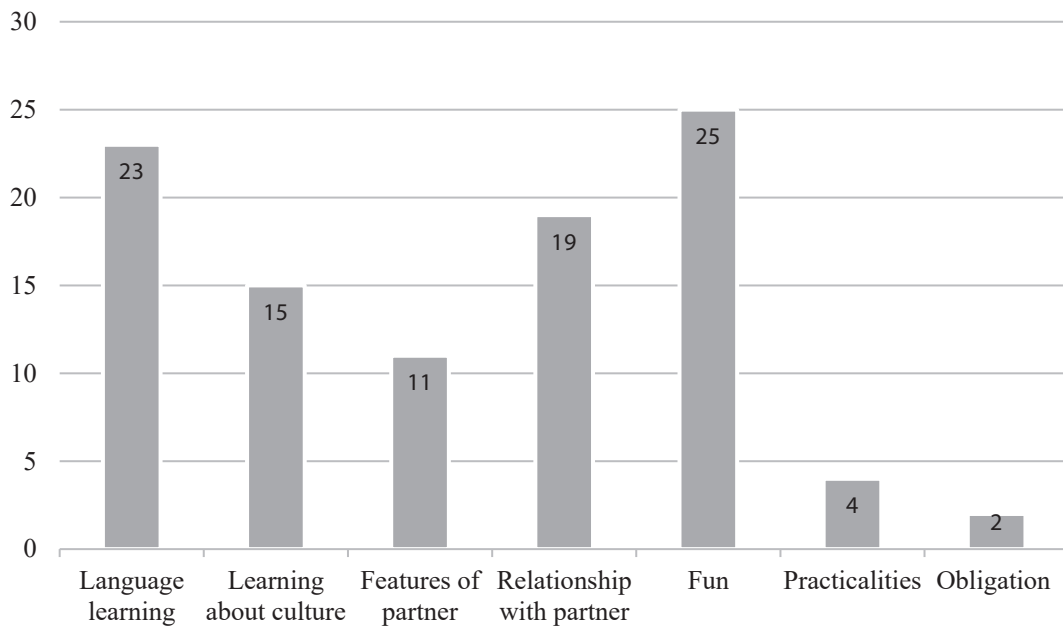


Figure 3. How frequently each category was mentioned by respondents as a reason for continuation on the programme.



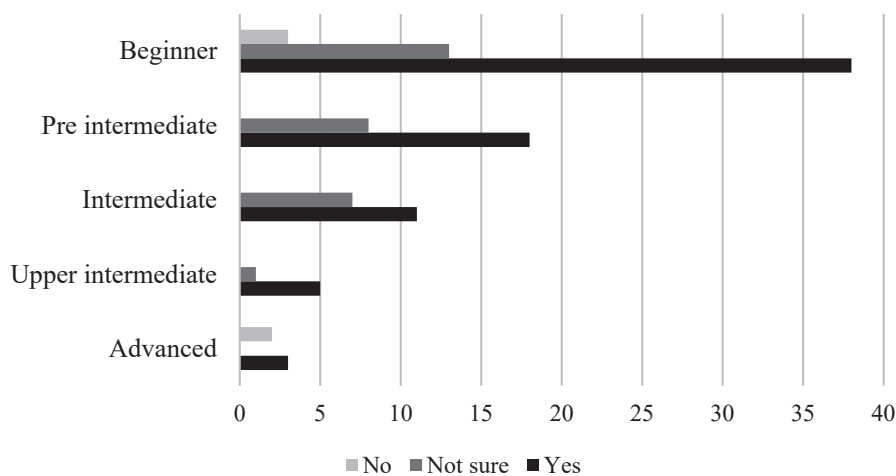
From the above, it can be seen that, of the reasons given for continuing the programme, 56% were related to social factors, while 38% were related to aspects of learning, either culture or language, and other aspects accounted for 6%.

The most frequent factor mentioned was “fun”. Respondents mostly used the word “fun” directly, for example, “It was fun to talk every week”, and “I continued because

it was a fun and interesting activity”, or used Japanese “*tanoshikatta*” translated to statements such as “I really enjoyed talking with my partner” and “enjoyed teaching each other”.

The next most frequent factor was language learning. Both Japanese and international students perceived the LEX programme to be beneficial to their language learning. As can be seen from Figure 4, the majority of respondents reported an improvement in their language level. “Improvement in language level” is very broad and comments include aspects of linguistic competence such as grammar, “I improved the grammatical mistakes I usually make during a conversation in Japanese”; vocabulary, “I can now speak the basic language necessary to study abroad”, “I learned more vocabulary words and kanji compositions meanings, and it help for my JLPT N3 test on December”, and “I can understand more vocabularies and phrases in newspapers”. Comments also included affective factors such as confidence and anxiety, “Just because of talking, my confidence in talking Japanese increased drastically”, and “I no longer fear speaking”.

Figure 4. Responses to the question “Did your language level improve as a result of the LEX programme.”



From those who responded that the main reason they continued the LEX programme was language-related, comments included “I wanted to improve my English”; “I could practice Japanese and ask anything I was curious about”; “I wanted to use my newly learned Japanese skills and see how I can use them in actual conversations”; and “meeting up weekly with someone with the explicit goal of helping each other to understand the other’s language helped.”

After “having fun” and “language learning”, many respondents felt that their relationship with their partner and features of their partner were motivational factors in

their perseverance on the LEX programme. Comments related to relationships referred to becoming “good friends”. One respondent wrote “we have felt it was not teaching, but learning, sharing and support as friends”, exemplifying the reciprocity which is a feature of tandem programmes. In some cases, similarities were key to a good relationship: “We got along very well and we were very similar and had similar senses of humour so I always looked forward to meeting them” and “There was a mutual interest in talking together and learning together.” In some cases, students highlighted particular aspects of their partner that were motivational, for example, “The other person showed a willingness to continue learning and to actively socialise, which motivated me to continue both my studies and my personal relationship with them.”, “I really wanted to teach Japanese because my partner was a very kind person and passionate about Japanese.” and “My partner is very patient in explaining things to me.”

Finally, learning about culture was an attractive point of the programme for many participants. In response to the question “Did you learn a lot about your partner’s culture?”, 97% of responses were positive, either strongly agreeing (65%) or agreeing (32%). Comments included “interesting because I got to hear about different cultures”, “I was looking forward to learning about Chinese culture each time”, and “She explained me curious things from Japan”.

Why students did not continue on LEX

Many respondents completed 9–10 sessions on the LEX programme. However, 18 participants met 7–8 times, 14 met 5–6 times and 3 people met 3–4 or 1–2 times. Among the respondents who stated that they did not complete 9 or 10 sessions the LEX programme the main reason was scheduling difficulties (17 respondents), including becoming too busy with coursework, changes in class schedules and being too busy to move between campuses. Other reasons mentioned for not continuing were one partner not attending or responding (3 respondents), partners having nothing in common, not getting on, or being ill (1 respondent respectively) .

4.2 Online euroTandem

What motivated students to continue their tandem in euroTandem?

The euroTandem programme involved a much smaller number of Chiba University students than the LEX programme. A questionnaire was sent to 10 students who had attended the guidance meeting for euroTandem about two-thirds through the euroTandem programme. Of the 7 participants who responded to the questionnaire, 5 had continued the tandem programme and declared their intention to continue to the end. Of these, three people agreed to be interviewed.

For the five respondents, the main reason for persevering on the programme was to learn German. All five stated this as a main reason. Three also mentioned that the interaction is fun, two included gaining new knowledge about the culture, and one concluded that it is “better to have a goal of speaking with this person rather than just studying with no aim”. One respondent strongly emphasised completion: “If it has started, it should be done as complete as possible in order not to regret”, he said.

From the above results, it can be seen that factors affecting students’ decisions to continue on a tandem programme were related to both improvement in the target language and to social factors such as the relationship between partners. This was true in both programmes, but it seems that for face-to-face tandem programmes, social factors outweighed language gains as motivating factors.

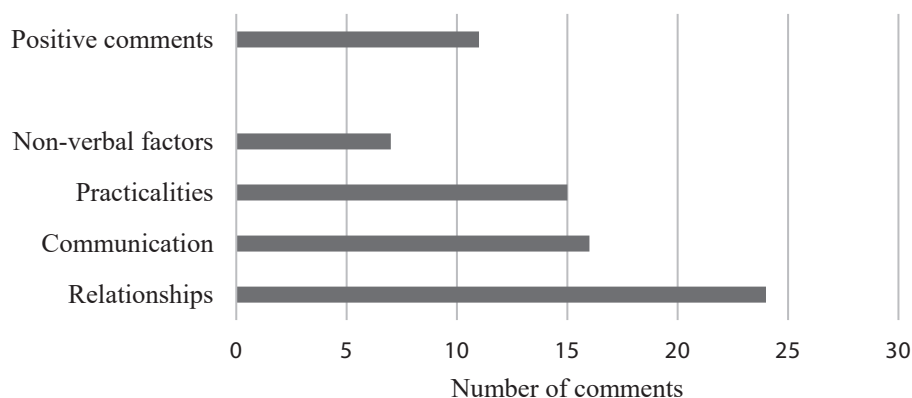
Research Question 2. What factors need to be addressed in order to encourage students to continue a tandem in an online setting?

Participants on the euroTandem programme were asked how they built a relationship with their partner. One emphasised the importance of maintaining frequent written contact in addition to the weekly online meeting. Another credited her partner’s kind and friendly personality, for preventing her from worrying about making mistakes. The third also complimented her partner on her kindness and ease of communication. The participants’ advice related to creating a successful tandem partnership online was to maintain contact, as mentioned above. Also, using a lingua franca can be beneficial. When describing her use of English in a German/Japanese partnership, the respondent said, “If the communication is slow, we could be friends, but I think quick communication is more. Due to the quick communication… it makes it easier to be friends”. A third point was to not take yourself too seriously: “don’t think seriously is the best thing to be friends with someone and also don’t make themselves look like a sophisticated person is also necessary”. Finally, preparation was mentioned as a key to success. “If both partners cannot speak the other’s language, it’s better to have fixed themes to make preparation easier”, said one interviewee.

LEX programme participants were almost entirely face-to-face for their entire programme. When asked whether they would be interested in doing the programme online, only 63% agreed, despite the high satisfaction rates with the programme in terms of language and culture knowledge gains and increases in motivation. Participants were asked, “What would be the main differences between doing LEX online and doing LEX face-to-face?” From the open responses, 11 comments were positive regarding online tandem sessions. Of these, 5 related to time, place and schedules being easier to manage; one mentioned that students in different countries will be able to interact if the

programme is online. Another mentioned ease of research on unfamiliar topics if you are already online. On the other hand, most of the comments were more negative. Figure 5 shows the frequency that four categories of negative comments related to doing the LEX programme online instead of face-to-face were mentioned.

Figure 5. Comments related to participating in language exchange online as opposed to face-to-face.



These negative comments included those regarding the comparative difficulty of forming relationships (24); for example, “I think we can become better friends face-to-face. I think this is because by actually meeting, you can get to know the other person in ways other than conversation” and “If it’s face to face, it’s more easier to get close to your partner by emotion, expression, and so on. But if you do it online, you are actually just talking to a machine and I think it’s not easy to maintain the motivation”, were representative comments. Communication was also perceived as being more difficult online than face-to-face by 16 people. Some comments were “LEX face-to-face, we can easily understand what the partner means” and “Sometimes it was difficult to communicate so body language was very useful.” Practicalities were the third most frequently mentioned category (15) with a focus on use of materials: “Doing LEX online does not allow us to see the same textbook directly.” On doing activities other than language learning, a student stated “Wouldn’t have the same fun like to be able to join lunch or something”. As well as these points, practicalities such as time difference and internet connectivity were also issues. Finally, non-verbal elements of communication, such as gestures and interpretation of facial expressions, were perceived as being more difficult in online communication.

5. Discussion

Many students join a tandem to learn a language rather than just making friends or

enjoying themselves. However, a friendly relationship between the partners, although not a prerequisite, does seem to be a strong motivational factor for continuing on a tandem programme, particularly for those who participate face-to-face. Therefore, careful matching of participants is beneficial, as having common characteristics, such as interests, activities, and language learning goals, makes it easier to develop relationships. For online tandem programmes this may be an even more important consideration for administrators as the major factor preventing students from being willing to join a language exchange online was the perceived difficulty of developing relationships online.

As language learning and learning about culture were also factors in participants continuing the programme, it is helpful to encourage them to identify their learning goals, including both overall and weekly goals that can contribute to an overall goal. This promotes a sense of achievement, for example a small increase in vocabulary level in a certain topic, or being better able to successfully communicate information about an aspect of one's own culture, or finding out something particularly interesting about the partner's culture. Additionally, if participants receive immediate feedback from their partner, they have an outcome from the session that they can build on in future sessions.

Features of the partner, such as their kindness or willingness to learn were further motivating factors. As the same partner is kept throughout the programme, features such as kindness, patience and a sense of humour are important. Although such characteristics are difficult to instill, they can be encouraged by reminding participants before the programme starts of acceptable/unacceptable behaviour and of cultural differences that may unintentionally offend partners who are less aware of diversity issues.

Of the face-to-face participants who responded to the question "I would be interested in doing the LEX programme if it were online with students in other countries", despite the majority of comments being negative, 63% stated they would be willing, while 37% would not. The factors mentioned above that contribute to students continuing on the face-to-face programme were similar to those mentioned by Thornton (2023) in her presentation of a successful online collaboration: emotional support between participants with encouragement, patience and no judgement, authentic communication, linguistic feedback, reciprocity and personal connections for example common interests, common studies and future plans. In order to encourage participants on online programmes, these factors should be considered, especially as "personal connections" was cited as the main reason why online programmes may be more difficult.

The online participants in this study recommended frequent contact beyond the one-hour video period, for example by posting or mailing to promote communication. This could be encouraged in the orientation session before a programme starts, along with

suggested methods of communication. They also recommended enough preparation before each session. This may, to some extent, overcome the problem of materials use during an online session which was mentioned as a possible barrier to smooth language exchange online. Finally, they recommended use of a lingua franca to facilitate understanding, especially in cases in which one of the participants is either a beginner or not as advanced in the target language as the other. This goes against the norm of 50/50 equal language use of the two target languages that is one of the standard principles of tandem programmes. However, if it increases participants' motivation by promoting success rather than failure to communicate, it should be accepted.

6. Conclusion

Although it may be difficult to make a direct comparison of the factors influencing perseverance on a language exchange programme between online and face-to-face programmes, especially as the sample size for the online programme was so small, it can be seen that there is an overlap between the contributing factors on the two types of programme. Additionally, from the experience of the online participants and from the concerns expressed by the face-to-face participants with regard to interacting online, valuable insights have been gained on how to approach online exchange programmes. Future research will investigate international online language exchange programmes with universities in four countries, which were established using the information gathered in this study.

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