

FACE-TO-FACE TANDEM AS LANGUAGE LEARNING AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION FOR STUDENTS OF PORTUGUESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT CELIN UFPR, BRAZIL

Tandem presencial como ferramenta para o aprendizado de língua e integração social de alunos de Português como Língua Estrangeira no Celin UFPR, Brasil

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ABSTRACT: Firstly, this article provides an overview of Tandem as a method for learning foreign languages. Secondly, the context in which the project Núcleo Tandem Celin is set is explained thoroughly as we go through the history and structure of Celin (UFPR Intercultural Language Center). Afterwards, the Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL) course is put into focus, outlining the growth on the number of foreign students in Curitiba, and the consequences it entails. We also provide an in-depth analysis at the project by explaining its processes and methodology, through current and past experiences. Therefore, we explore the reformulation of the program in which measures to establish its institutional recognition and to attribute the mediation process a pivotal role which ensured its success and sustainability. Finally, we present a testimonial from a student enrolled in the project in order to illustrate the participants' experience.

KEYWORDS: Tandem method; institutional Tandem; Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL).

RESUMO: O presente artigo oferece primeiramente um panorama do Tandem como método na aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras. Em segundo lugar, o contexto no qual o projeto Núcleo Tandem Celin se encontra é explicado em detalhes à medida que passamos pela história e estrutura do Celin (Centro de Línguas e Interculturalidade da UFPR). Em seguida, enfoca-se o curso de Português como Língua Estrangeira (PLE), destacando o crescimento do número de estudantes estrangeiros em Curitiba, e as consequências desse crescimento. Analisamos ainda mais o projeto explicando seus processos e metodologia, por meio de experiências atuais e passadas. Exploramos então a reformulação do programa em que medidas para estabelecer seu reconhecimento institucional e para atribuir importância central ao processo de mediação que garantiram seu sucesso e sustentabilidade. Por fim, apresentamos um depoimento de um aluno inscrito no projeto para ilustrar a experiência dos participantes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Método Tandem; Tandem institucional; Português como Língua Estrangeira (PLE).

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INTRODUCTION

The word “tandem” is originally a Latin term and is currently used to designate a bicycle ridden by two people that simultaneously cycle to a common destination, in a fast, ecological and cheap way. Because it has more than one seat, it is said that its movement has as its base the partnership, or union of efforts. The term “tandem” had its meaning widened and has gained an educational sense, in particular when it comes to the acquisition of a foreign language, when two people from different nationalities work together to learn each other’s language. It basically involves pairs of speakers (native or competent) aiming to learn each other’s languages through bilingual conversational sessions. (TELLES; VASSALLO, 2006)

For a continuous face-to-face Tandem program, a specific structure is necessary, such as a university that receives a substantial number of foreign students. In this environment a Tandem office can be created, so as to maintain direct contact with students, encouraging them to take part in the project.

This paper is a detailed report of how Tandem was introduced at the Celin-UFPR, discussing mainly the context in which it was implemented, the most important premises of the method³, the process of becoming institutionalized and the results achieved in 2015 and 2016.

PORTUGUESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT CELIN - UFPR

Celin (Centro de Línguas e Interculturalidade – Intercultural Language Center) was created in 1995 as an important space for integrating the Federal University of Parana's (UFPR) foreign language courses and teaching practice, by providing extracurricular training opportunities and research support. For this reason, Celin is a representative space for developing practices in the learning of a foreign language and culture.

³ Even though the use of the term "method" in the language learning literature does not commonly address contexts like Tandem, this is the term that previous researchers have opted to deploy (TELLES; VASSALLO, 2006). From our perspective, the term also highlights the difference between structured Tandem partnerships and casual, informal meetings that do not follow the Tandem premises.

Nowadays, around 3,900 students from the UFPR community or the external community are distributed among 300 groups and 22 languages that are taught in three different branches. Out of the 22 languages offered, some have a high demand, such as English, French, German, Spanish and Italian, whereas others are present due to their historical relevance to the local community (such as Polish, Japanese and Guarani) or the center's interest in diversity, such as Esperanto and Sanskrit.

The increasing development in economic and social areas in Brazil has raised the international interest in the country, which is reflected in the university's process of internationalization, which considers the increase of exchange partnerships and exchange students as one of its priorities. In the past few years Celin has been recognized as a high quality education center for Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL), becoming a reference for students from many different countries. The Language Center is an accredited center of Celpe-Bras⁴, the only certification in PFL approved by the Education and Culture Ministry in Brazil (MEC). In 2015, 715 foreign students enrolled in the PFL course, whereas in 2016 this number increased to 801, a growth of 12% in just a year time.

This significant increase affects not only the needs of Celin in regard to its pedagogical approaches, but also the necessity of having a space designated for these students in particular, offering a welcome orientation, information regarding the daily life in the city, and continuous support. This demand made it possible for the Tandem program to be restructured and broadened, incorporating into its responsibilities the exchange partnerships and all other activities regarding foreign students, including those related to their daily support. It has also had its name changed to "Núcleo Tandem Celin" (Tandem Celin Center) since its role has been expanded.

Amongst its activities are the registration, pairing, and mediation of new Tandem pairs; as well as the reception of foreigners, the production and updating of the information handbooks⁵ handed in to the newcomers, and the organization of monitored cultural activities are included⁶. Currently, the PFL course load is 15 hours per week, from which 12 are classroom based, and 3 are Tandem plus cultural activities.

⁴ Celpe-Bras stands for "Certificação de Proficiência em Língua Portuguesa para Estrangeiros-Brasil".

⁵ https://issuu.com/celinufpr/docs/handbook_for_foreign_students_at_ce

⁶ <http://www.celin.ufpr.br/index.php/atividade-intercultural-ple>



Foto 1. Cultural activity: picnic at the end of the PFL course module (December, 2013)

THE TANDEM PROJECT AT CELIN

The Tandem project was implemented in 2007, with a focus on face-to-face interactions. In its first year, 372 students took part in the project, constituting 186 pairs in 12 different languages. Since then, this project has had an important role in language and intercultural learning for both foreign students that are studying PFL and Brazilian students that are learning the different languages offered at Celin. For foreigners, Tandem has also proved to be crucial for their social integration.

The Tandem project is open to Celin's students and the community at large. Foreigners who are not studying at Celin are strongly encouraged to participate, since there are languages whose number of speakers is lower than the demand of Brazilians who want to practice them. Participation is free of charge.

Enrollment procedures

To enroll in the Tandem project, the participant must fill out an application form⁷, providing his/her personal information (name, age, telephone number, email, gender, profession and address), by answering if he/she is a student at Celin or at UFPR, by mentioning his/her personal interests and availability for dates and times for the meetings, and, most importantly, the languages that he/she wants to practice and their mother tongue/language in which they are proficient. All this data is entered, and by cross-referencing the information, partnerships are suggested, so as to match the information written down in the application form (profile and time availability). This helps establish partnerships that are as compatible as possible.

The participants are contacted by email and/or telephone and invited for a first meeting, which is mediated by one of the Núcleo Tandem members. The participants will then come to the Tandem office at a date and time previously scheduled in which the partners are introduced to each other and the Tandem principles are explained.

Principles of the Tandem method

One of the objectives of this first mediated meeting is to outline some ground rules for the partnership. In the Tandem method there are three basic principles that must be followed: reciprocity, language separation, and autonomy.

According to Brammerts and Kleppin (2010), successful learning in a Tandem context is based on mutual dependency and support. Both participants must equally benefit and contribute. The second principle is to avoid mixing the two languages that are being practiced in the same Tandem section. The meeting should occur twice a week, if possible, having the same amount of time dedicated to each language (ROST-ROTH, 1995 *apud* TELLES; VASSALLO, 2006). These suggestions are given to the participants in their first mediated meeting, but when it is not possible to meet twice a week the principles are adapted to the students' realities, keeping focus on the principle that both languages should receive the same attention and time dedicated. We emphasize that these

⁷<http://www.celin.ufpr.br/index.php/quem-pode-se-inscrever>

rules are what differentiate a Tandem partnership from any informal conversation with a foreigner. The third principle refers to the autonomy: "the partners have in deciding when, how and what they want to learn, making each student responsible for their own learning process" (BRAMMERTS; KLEPPIN, 2010, p. 10, our translation)⁸.

Relevance of mediation

In this first guided meeting, we explain the principles and also ask all participants to fill out a self-assessment sheet, which aims at raising their awareness on their learning strategies and objectives. A symbolic contract is signed and their next meetings must be pre-scheduled. At the end of this session Tandem resources are shown (such as the Seagull website)⁹, and the possibility of getting a certificate for the hours they do in-tandem is presented. This certificate can be used by UFPR students as a proof of credits, as will be explained in detail further in this article.

At Núcleo Tandem Celin no partnership starts without this first meeting. This is the moment when the mediation of the Tandem team is more evident, since it always happens in the presence of one of the coordinators or interns¹⁰. The objective is to promote the support for a more efficient autonomous learning process, which has been considered in the literature as essential to successful partnerships.

To Lewis (2003), the autonomy in Tandem depends essentially on the development of the ability to reflect upon the learning process and the structural forms of the mother tongue. It grows and feeds from the collaboration between the apprentices, which is breeding ground to the learning and development of autonomy. In this autonomous environment, the acquisition of the language happens during the interaction and not as its final result. Therefore, the author demonstrates the importance of a mediating teacher when affirming that training the apprentices in giving feedback to their partners can make the learning process more effective. (SIMÕES; LIMA, 2009, p. 225, our translation).¹¹

⁸ Original text: "Jeder der beiden Partner ist für sein eigenes Lernen verantwortlich. Er bestimmt *was er wie und wann* lernen will [...]".

⁹ Smart Educational Autonomy through Guided Language Learning (Seagull): <http://seagull-tandem.eu/>

¹⁰ The interns at Tandem are undergraduate students of Modern Languages at UFPR that through internships were involved in the administrative and pedagogical activities of Núcleo Tandem.

¹¹ Original text: "Para Lewis (2003), a autonomia em Tandem depende essencialmente do desenvolvimento da capacidade para a reflexão sobre o processo de aprendizagem e sobre as formas estruturais da língua-alvo. Ela cresce e se alimenta da colaboração entre aprendizes, a qual é propícia para a aprendizagem e para o desenvolvimento da autonomia. Nesse ambiente autônomo, a aquisição da língua ocorre durante a interação e não como resultado final da interação. Sendo assim, o autor demonstra a importância do professor mediador ao afirmar que treinar os aprendizes a fornecer feedback aos parceiros pode ser um modo de tornar a aprendizagem mais eficaz."

The quoted authors explain that language acquisition is not the final result of the process but the process itself. Lewis shares the idea that the mediator is important and takes an active part in this process. It is the mediator who helps the students in the reflection about their own learning, supporting their self-assessment in where they are (linguistic and culturally), where they want to get and what would be the most advisable way for them to reach their goals. Many times the student does not have the necessary knowledge and conditions to set feasible goals and create the path to reach those goals.

In this process (in Tandem context), besides the partners, it is necessary to have a third person who mediates the interaction; not necessarily in the moment in which they take place but in the meetings in which the learning goals, reached results and next steps are discussed (SIMÕES; LIMA, 2009, p. 224, our translation)¹².

According to Simões and Lima (2009), the mediator would be the one that helps, guides and makes the partners aware of what it means to be in a Tandem context. This person has a role that is different from that of a language instructor, since their function is not to teach the contents and evaluate the results, but only to offer the initial tools for the partnership to happen successfully. This first meeting of mediation was a central point in the reformulation of the project in April/2013, and since then it has been the main focus of Núcleo Tandem Celin's practices and in the education and training of the "tandemnistas"¹³ interns.

Institutionalization

According to the researcher Maria Luisa Vassallo (SALOMÃO, 2006) distinct categorizations can be established based on the context in which Tandem is presented, including institutional, semi-institutional and non-institutional contexts. According to the level of official recognition there can be further subdivisions. The non-integrated institutional Tandem, for instance, presents the case in which the institution supports the program and/or provides some type of resources to its participants, but because this sort

¹²Original text: "Neste processo [em contexto Tandem], além dos parceiros, faz-se necessário uma terceira pessoa que medie as interações, mas não necessariamente no momento em que elas ocorrem e sim em reuniões, nas quais são discutidos os objetivos de aprendizagem e os resultados alcançados e os próximos passos a serem trilhados pelo aprendiz". (cf.: Simões; Lima: 2009, p. 224).

¹³"Tandemnista" is a term created by Núcleo Tandem coordinators to designate the interns that are trained in the theory and practice of the method, being able to create new partnerships and mediate the meetings.

of subdivision is not officially recognized, it could also be developed independently from a language course. Apart from this, the complementary institutional Tandem can be chosen among the optional initiatives and, in this case, be recognized by the institution as a part of the course (BRAMMERTS et al., 2010 *apud* VASSALLO, 2006).

Initially implemented as a non-integrated institutional project, the Tandem Celin program did not provide an official recognition to participants. However, since June 2013, it has acquired the status of Integrated Tandem within the structure of Celin-UFPR, recognized as part of the PFL course and representing 20% of the hours of the courses between Tandem hours and cultural activities, also organized by Núcleo Tandem. As for the Brazilian UFPR students, the process of institutionalization meant that they were given credits by UFPR for their Tandem hours. All participants are encouraged to fill out a report with their hours of Tandem meetings to receive a certificate (as explained before), and this certificate is recognized by the Departments of Foreign Languages as formative hours. Since all students are required a minimum number of hours, the validation of the Tandem is a significant encouragement for their participation.

RESULTS AND FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

The institutionalization of the Tandem project at Celin and the importance given to the mediation are greatly responsible for the success of the project, which can be seen in numbers. From January/2015 to November/2016, the project received 1,514 applications, and was able to pair 1,208 students. These 604 pairs were between Brazilians and foreigners from 18 different languages, from which the most significant in number were Spanish, English, French, Korean, followed by German, Japanese, Arabic, Mandarin, Italian, Russian, Dutch, Hungarian, Polish, Creole, Finnish, Tetum, Swedish, Quechua.

When contacting Núcleo Tandem to receive their certificate, participants are requested to send a short testimonial explaining their experience during the partnership. These testimonials are great feedback not only regarding the dynamics of their meetings, but also on the mediation that is being offered.

One testimonial was selected, because it manifests some important aspects of the Tandem partnership. This and other testimonials are available on the Celin website.¹⁴

¹⁴<http://www.celin.ufpr.br/index.php/depoimentos-participantes>

Testimonial

When I started the Tandem meetings with my Brazilian partner my Portuguese was so bad that I could not even tell the difference between Spanish and Portuguese... He was much better in the other language, so in the beginning it was a little difficult for me, shy because of my gringo accent!

But later I realized that the difference in the level is only a problem in a “normal” class, with many people, in a Tandem it does not matter, there are no teachers and students, no one teaches, but both learn and discover! Besides, the “formal” Tandems did not take long to be substituted by the nightclub Tandems, caipirinha Tandems and bike Tandems! Moreover, Tandem has not only helped me a lot in learning Portuguese, but was also the best way to get to know the city and its people!

(J. R., French participant, French/Portuguese partnership, our translation).

(Núcleo Tandem Celin)

The participant J. R. makes it clear that he experienced something that he considers a great benefit: the constant exchange of roles that the method demands. There is no fixed teacher or student, and these roles constantly alternate and hence do not create an intimidating learning environment to the less proficient. (HERFURT, 1993, *apud* TELLES; VASSALLO, 2006, p. 16). Still, according to Telles and Vassallo (2006), “[...] both speakers are not certified foreign language teachers. None of them will actually *teach* a language. Rather, they will *use* language for sharing ideas, thoughts and cultural information” (TELLES; VASSALLO, 2006, p. 02).

The testimonial also emphasizes that besides the linguistic and cultural benefits of the method, it is also important for the integration of the student in the local community. The fact that the meeting could take place in various locations (such as the ones cited in the testimonial) also contributes in the adjustment of the foreigner in the new city.

CONCLUSIONS

The Face-to-face Tandem project at Celin has responded to an expanding context of internationalization since its very creation, a context in which UFPR, as most Brazilian universities, is immersed. By having a well-structured PFL course that welcomes students from various countries and mother tongues, it is possible to have such a large and successful face-to-face program.

For PFL students, it is frequently their first close contact with a Brazilian, and that has a significant role in their integration in their new city and culture. On the other hand, for students from Foreign Languages Courses at UFPR, it is an opportunity to have access to native speakers of their target language. By getting recognition from the university, these participants are further encouraged to enroll. This change of status, from non-integrated to integrated, as well as the enhanced importance given to the mediation of the partnerships, were from our point of view essential to the growth and sustainability of the project.

It is clear to us that the role of the mediator is crucial for the students' growing autonomy in their learning process. In many cases, the mediator can intervene in issues such as incompatible schedules, divergent needs and interests, and lack of conversation topics, providing a space in which these problems can be discussed and suggesting some extra resources.

We believe that the Tandem method is a feasible and accessible complement to the classroom work on linguistic and cultural aspects that respects the subjects' individualities and backgrounds. The possibility of these encounters can be used to bridge the borders between peoples and cultures, allowing the understanding of the "other" and of oneself.

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