

7 The European University Tandem project – an integrated online platform to foster intercultural language exchanges across Europe (and beyond)

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Abstract

Language learning in tandem exchanges offers students a wealth of learning opportunities that are characterised by reciprocal and autonomous learning and foster authentic communication (Brammerts, 2001). Increasingly, these encounters take place online and, in this context, the EU-funded European University Tandem (EUniTa) project developed an integrated online platform which is specifically targeted at university students. Based on Web Real-Time Communications (WebRTC) technology, the platform offers students the chance to find a tandem partner and work with a range of materials designed to support the tandem exchanges. In this article, we will outline some key principles of learning in online tandem exchanges, introduce the main features of the EUniTa platform and discuss the development of the materials which were designed to foster students' Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

Keywords: tandem exchanges, technology-enhanced learning, collaborative learning, autonomous learning.

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1. Introduction

Tandem exchanges are a popular means to offer university students additional ways to practise their foreign language skills outside the classroom. Increasingly, tandem encounters take place online, and in this context, the EUniTa project developed an integrated platform for students to take part in language exchanges with students from partner universities. The project has been financially supported by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Programme between October 2015 and March 2018, and involved seven partner universities from five European countries – University of Exeter, University of Florence, Goethe University Frankfurt, University of Liverpool, Paris Sorbonne University, University of Poitiers and Blanquerna, and Universitat Ramon Llull. The platform can be viewed at www.eunita.org.

2. Characteristics of (online) tandem exchanges

The EUniTa platform for online tandem exchanges is characterised by a number of principles that generally apply to tandem learning settings. One of these principles is reciprocity (Brammerts, 2001), which highlights that tandem participants form a learning partnership and communicate as peers, alternating between the role of language learner and language expert. The principle of reciprocity presupposes that both partners possess competences which the other would like to learn (Augustin, 2011, p. 273), hence promoting the idea of cooperative learning (Funk, Gerlach, & Spaniel-Weise, 2017, p. 12). Brammerts (2001) further highlights learner autonomy as a defining principle of tandem learning. Autonomy represents a legitimate and desirable goal of language education (Benson, 2001, p. 2) and tandem exchanges give learners control over how to conduct the sessions as well as responsibility for their own learning. Learners decide which topics to discuss and which materials to use. They can negotiate their approach to feedback and error correction. Furthermore, tandem learning has the potential to foster intercultural learning even if it has been argued that this is less of a principle and more of a description of the relationship involved in the tandem exchange (Woodin, 2018, p. 10).

Online tandems share the same principles as face-to-face tandems and “focus learners on actively engaging in a foreign language community [whilst] exploiting the advantages of digital media” (Funk et al., 2017, p. 34). While the Internet has been used for the purpose of tandem exchanges since the mid-1990s – back then in the form of email (Cziko, 2004, p. 32) –, current technology allows for the use of synchronous videoconferencing technology, emulating face-to-face tandems more closely.

The fact that learning in tandem settings is characterised by a number of attributes that language educators generally like to promote in language teaching and learning contexts, such as learner autonomy, collaborative approaches to learning, or authentic language encounters, explains why tandem exchanges tend to be promoted widely by language departments and institution-wide language provisions. In light of technological advancements and due to the fact that it can be difficult to find a sufficient number of native speakers on campus, conducting tandem exchanges online has the potential to engage an increasing number of students in tandem learning. In this context, the EUniTa project developed an online platform to capitalise on this potential and foster online student tandem exchanges.

3. Features of the EUniTa platform

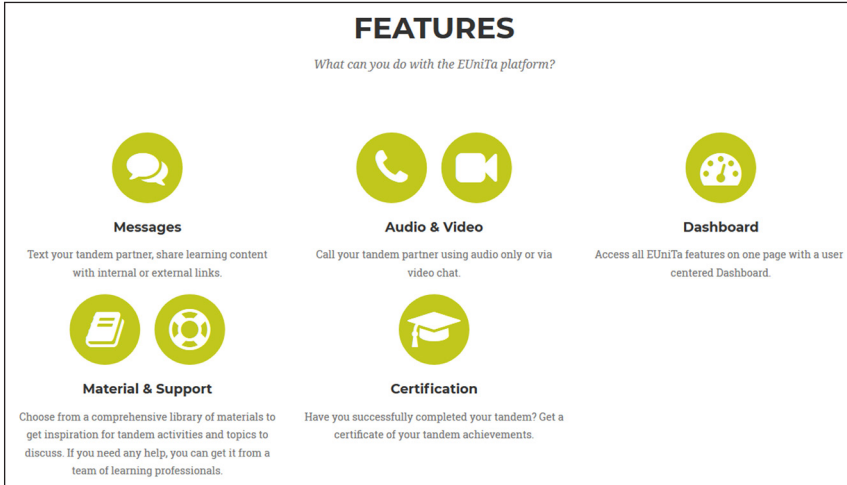
While there is a range of online platforms available for tandem exchanges, EUniTa is the only platform specifically created for university students that provides academic-related subject-specific material. This exclusive character of EUniTa supports university-level conversations and creates a safer environment for its users by restricting access to students from the participating partner universities⁴.

EUniTa offers an integrated platform based on WebRTC technology which enables users to have their tandem without the need of employing additional

4. This is intended to prevent misuse (e.g. harassment) since user identities are easily traceable and any misuse of the platform can be acted upon immediately.

media (see Figure 1). It is accessible on PCs and mobile devices alike due to its adaptive interface.

Figure 1. EUniTa features⁵



When registering and creating a profile, students are asked to provide their language level. In order to facilitate this, the platform contains a self-assessment test to determine language levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001). Having data on the students' language levels is also important for the automatic tandem matching process, which allows an efficient way of bringing users together.

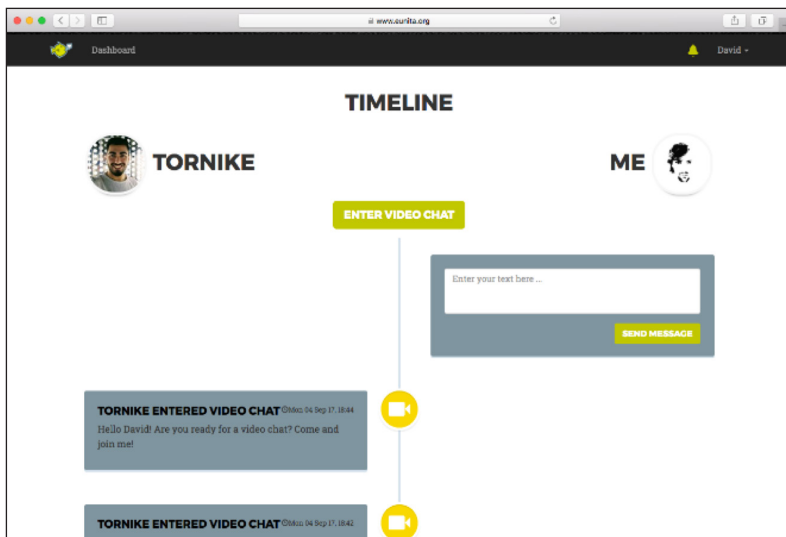
An up-to-date timeline (see Figure 2) allows students to keep a record of their tandem activities and can support them if they decide to make use of the platform's option to receive a certificate.

For the matching process, a set of hard and soft criteria is employed. The term 'hard criteria' refers to the set of criteria that needs to be fully met in order for

5. Materials from the EUniTa platform are reproduced with kind permissions from © EUniTa, EU Non-Proliferation Consortium eLearning, as per their terms of use; <https://www.eunita.org/>

the system to match two users in a tandem, whereas ‘soft criteria’ describes a collection of criteria that optimise the created tandem further. The former includes the target language and the language offered. Should a student want to improve their language skills, especially within their academic field or subject area, they can tick a box to that effect when registering for a tandem and would then only be paired with somebody who has the same objective. Soft criteria, on the other hand, include the same language level for both target and offered language as well as the same expectations with regards to the frequency of learning, topics to be discussed, and age of both tandem partners.

Figure 2. Timeline



4. BICS and CALP materials

As the EUniTa platform matches participants for general as well as academic language exchanges, two types of materials are offered: BICS guides to improve *basic interpersonal communication skills* and CALP guides to help build *cognitive academic language proficiency*. BICS is the context-embedded

language necessary for day-to-day interaction and informal conversations, whilst CALP is necessary to understand and discuss more abstract language with few, if any, non-verbal cues (see de Wit, 2015, referring to Cummins, 1979). BICS covers all levels of the CEFR, whilst CALP – for which at least five years of learning are required to reach full proficiency (Cummins, 2016, p. 942) – correlates with the higher levels only, starting from B2. Consequently, the platform offers CALP material only at B and C levels, whilst BICS covers the whole range (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Library drop-down menu of EUniTa materials

▶ Society							
▶ Daily Life							
▶ Me & the Others							
▶ Studies and Careers							
▼ Culture							
▶ Architecture							
▶ Books & Authors							
▼ Films & TV							
Titel	Level	Prep.	Language				
Cinema	A2	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Français	Italiano
Cinema B1	B1	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Français	Italiano
Cinema B2	B2	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Français	Italiano
Cinema C1	C1	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Français	Italiano
▶ Food & Recipes							
▶ Museums							
▶ Music							
▶ Stereotypes							
▶ Health & Sports							
▶ Places & Spaces							
▶ Academic Topics (CALP)							

To respond to the greater demand for BICS, there are 151 worksheets on 41 topics across seven categories⁶ and six CEFR levels, each available in six languages. Each topic includes worksheets on different levels to allow students to monitor

6. For category titles see the top level titles in the screenshot above.

their progress. A typical worksheet such as ‘Living in another country’ at A2 level (CEFR), on the topic ‘Moving Countries’ within the category ‘Studies and Careers’, will have a general topic particularly relevant for university students and will set off with a preparatory task designed to recall or look up relevant vocabulary. On lower levels, some basic phrases are provided, but there is no link to a dictionary, since the students are meant to work out relevant vocabulary with the help of each other.

The main tasks would include application of grammar and phrases typical for the level, such as likes and dislikes or the opportunity to use past tenses at A2. There is no integrated grammar on EUniTa: users are meant to apply in conversation what they have learnt before; the goal is to improve speaking and interaction skills.

For CALP conversations, EUniTa offers worksheets on 34 topics within three broad disciplines: Humanities, Natural and Medical Sciences, and Social Sciences. Here again, the principle of collaborative learning truly comes into play: the partners are relied on for technical terms and subject-/discipline-specific expertise, and this is made possible by matching students from similar disciplines. What the sheets offer are suggestions as to how to start collecting and exchanging these terms as well as support for practising communicative functions required in academic and professional contexts, e.g. presentations, discussions and debates, data interpretation, or providing critical feedback.

For example, the worksheet on ‘Intercultural Communication’ within the ‘Humanities’ category (https://www.eunita.org/files/materials/181_en_GB.pdf) links to authentic materials in which abstract topics, e.g. Saxon, Teutonic, Gallic, and Nipponic intellectual styles are discussed. Authentic means that each sheet will link to material in the respective target language and thus worksheets on the same topic, but in different languages, may link to different original material such as graphs, videos, or articles. Analysing, discussing, contrasting, and comparing such materials will not only help to unearth the relevant subject vocabulary, but also to improve communicative functions. To encourage further independent learning, the worksheets may conclude with a follow-up activity,

such as inviting users to find another article on the given topic in their own language and discussing it with the partner at their next tandem meeting.

5. Conclusion

According to [Cziko \(2004, p. 38\)](#), the growth of technology has increased the need of foreign languages and cultures while at the same time providing new means and resources by which this knowledge can be obtained. In this context, language learning in online tandems represents an innovative way of exploiting technology to offer students the opportunity to engage in non-formal language learning in authentic, reciprocal, and intercultural communication settings. The EUniTa platform constitutes a new online tandem provider in this regard, matching university students with each other to enable them to engage in language exchanges. In addition to offering participants automatic matching and an integrated platform, EUniTa also provides a wealth of tandem learning materials, which have been designed not only to foster interpersonal communication skills, but, crucially, also cognitive academic language proficiency.

In the next phase of the project, we will evaluate to what extent and in what manner participants are making use of the EUniTa platform, its features and the materials on offer. It will be interesting to observe if students manage to engage in successful exchanges, being able to negotiate the exchange entirely autonomously and reciprocally. In terms of development, the project is also looking to expand the number of partner universities and diversify the host countries involved in order to grow the platform, open it to an increasing number of students, and add further languages.

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