

Developing an Informal Tandem Learning Scheme for Young Researchers and Academics

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Abstract

The constant change in technologies and organizations today require higher education institutions to adapt just as quickly to the new situations. This is especially important for teachers in second language classrooms, as they try to prepare students for this changing world. In the EFL context in which this research took place, students were unable to find research partners to practice higher-level English in a more authentic environment. As such, a Tandem Language Learning (TaLL) approach was proposed. TaLL is recognized as an effective approach in improving the quality of the learning environment as ideally, the knowledge learned has intrinsic value to the learner and it can also be transferred to various real-world contexts. This longitudinal research project aimed to develop an informal environment in which students could freely practice research skills with students in other parts of Japan through video conferencing. The first step was to conduct a curriculum analysis to identify if the underlying principles were embedded within the curriculum and teaching practices. A Curriculum Analysis Framework was developed to address three areas: (1) Policy (2) Practice and (3) Process. Following this, the TaLL program could be implemented.

Key Words: Tandem Language Learning (TaLL), Informal Learning Environment (ILE), Video-mediated Conferencing, Social Constructivism, Learner-generated content

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Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been somewhat of a technological revolution occurring in many universities in Japan. Traditional classrooms with rows of hard, unmoving seats have given way to Blended Learning Spaces (BLS) and Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) accompanied with the latest technology. More and more, language programs are beginning to incorporate self-study modules and out-of-class learning through online learning platforms. With all these innovations, one of the problems that many institutions face is the lack of use of the new systems possibly due to teachers continuing to hold on to tried and tested methodologies or anxiety over having to learn how to use the new technologies. In the specific context in which this research took place, for example, a PLE had already been established in the form of conversation and consultation rooms complete with wi-fi, loaner iPads, large displays, sofas and desks. However, the number of students actually using the space was minimal. As such, the researcher made a suggestion to repurpose the space by introducing a Tandem Language Learning program as a support service to young researchers and academics who required a PLE to practice and receive advice on scientific English.

Tandem Language Learning (TaLL) is a form of autonomous language learning in which two students work in tandem to help one another improve language skills. The idea was that students could use the PLE to experience authentic communication in a real-life situation and support each other. Traditional TaLL programs assume that one of the partners is an expert and the other is a beginner. In a sense, the principle of reciprocity needs to be maintained in order for TaLL to be successful (Brammerts, 1996). There have been several types of official tandem programs since the 1800s starting with face-to-face tandems. In the 1960s, a French-German Tandem partnership was organized which gave birth to TaLL as it is known today. Today, there are classroom TaLL projects, etandem (email) projects, instant-messaging and more recently video-mediated TaLL (skype, FaceTime). The common factor among these programs is that there is a mutual exchange of two languages. Previous studies have focused on areas such as improvement in language forms (O'Rourke, 2005; Kabata & Edasawa, 2011), fluency (Shuman & Stemberger, 2019), internationalization (Woodin, 2018; 2019) and professional skills (Aguilar Rio, Brudermann & Abbendroth-Timmer, 2019).

This research proposed an alternative to traditional foreign language based TaLL programs. Rather than focus on language gains or cultural exchange, the researcher focused on the immediate needs of the students, which was to improve scientific research language. This research was thus a somewhat unconventional Tandem Language Learning (TaLL) project in which young academics and researchers could meet, discuss and share scientific research through networking. Face-to-face and video-mediated TaLL were considered to be the best options for students to experience authentic and meaningful engagement with the target language (Lafford & Lafford, 2005; Muhr, 2012). Face-to-face learning in the same physical space, offered students the opportunity of engaging in a real-life social situation in which they had interact naturally with others such as greetings, small talk and other basic conversational civilities. In addition, they could get real-time feedback on posters and body language during presentations. Research suggests that during face-to-face dyads, partners employ a variety of non-verbal skills which is mirrored by their partner. It

further allowed for a larger number of students to interact at any given time. This kind of setting was more natural. Video exchanges aimed to bring together partners in distant locations. This was important to help students become accustomed to dealing with unfamiliar faces and situations. Through video conference, students would have to adjust in real-time to a 'fractured' environment (Hjulstad, 2016, Luff et al., 2003) in which they would have to deal with technical difficulties (such as volume or camera adjustment and time lag in voices), stand or sit in one spot and interact with only one person instead of engaging in larger, informal group discussion. Video-mediated tandem thus required students to be focused, clarify information, speak clearly and negotiate turn-taking.

Before development of the TaLL program could commence, approval first had to be granted to conduct the research. Once approved, the researcher was able to begin the project. A location had to be decided upon, participants had to be found and an underlying theory that would guide the program had to be established. Research literature was consulted to help situate the research within current TaLL theories, the institutional goals and the aim of the study. A curriculum analysis framework was developed in order to understand any potential challenges before implementing the program. Three areas were examined: university policy, teaching practices and the learning process as viewed by the learners. Workshops were offered as a way of understanding if there was a need for such a program as well as attracting potential research participants. The paper will present the TaLL framework and results of the framework analysis.

Practical considerations

There were several things to consider at the beginning of the research and the first was location. At first, a classroom was first offered to the researcher to trial the program, but there were too many limitations to developing TaLL in a typical formal classroom setting. The first was the physical size and layout of the classroom with its traditional setup of rows of desks and chairs and a lectern at the front. As TaLL is based on the idea of natural social interaction, the setting necessitated a more natural, relaxed L2 immersion environment. There was no curriculum which is typically connected to learning in classroom settings. Instead, there was a list of themes negotiated by teacher and students depending on student needs. The final classroom limitation was the limited availability of technological tools with which the students could engage. Logistically, students were only able to meet at lunch time as it was the only time all students would not be in any classes. The setting that was eventually decided on was the conversation room which was built for language consultation and conversation purposes. These rooms included large displays, iPads and sofas so that students could feel more relaxed.

Theoretical considerations

The TaLL design framework was founded upon social constructivist pedagogy (Vygotsky, 1962; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998; Brookfield, 1986). The key point of this constructivist environment was promoting the following pedagogic and holistic ideals:

- *Learner control* Students decide content and theme
- *Authenticity* Language and situation is real
- *Flexibility* Students can come and go as they wish
- *Freedom of choice* Students are free to participate or not
- *Reflexivity* Think about the benefits of participation
- *Interaction* Be natural and get to know each other
- *Cultural sensitivity* Be aware of cultural differences and try not to offend

It was essential that the program, through these ideals, could establish a non-threatening environment through which learners could feel supported.

Research context

Participants involved with the research were students at a top national university in Japan, ranging from first year undergraduate to second year doctoral student. There were learners from eight different countries: Japan, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Korea, Bangladesh, Taiwan and Thailand (Figure 1). English was the common language used between students for communication. English proficiency levels varied widely from intermediate to fluent for daily conversation (CEFR B1-C2), but beginner to intermediate (CEFR A2-B2) when communicating about research matters. This made the program unique as students were learning and practicing techniques to improve specific language skills.

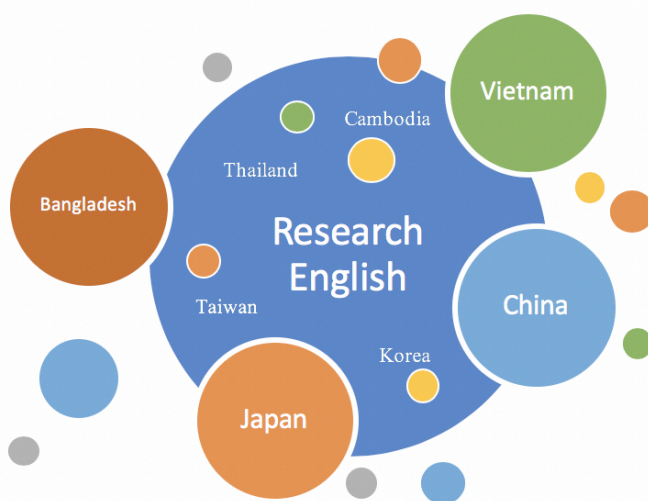


Figure 1: Representation of participants' various languages and countries

Curriculum Analysis Framework

A curriculum analysis of the current situation was the first stage of the research. It was developed to address three areas: Policy, Practice: and Process (see Figure 2). Each area was explored to identify the connection to the curricular vision, mission and directives (VMD) of the institution. The first step was to examine online syllabi guidelines and how it connected to the VMD. The underlying philosophy of Kyoto University is "academic freedom". As such, institutional policies required learner autonomy to be an integral part of the curriculum in order to encourage independent

learning. The researcher examined the online syllabus of mandatory language courses to understand if they reflected the policy of freedom and self-reliance and to address how they fit within the TaLL framework. Second, explicit and indirect approaches teachers used in the classroom were examined. Eight full-time teachers of freshman students were interviewed about teaching practices in the current curriculum. Teachers were selected due to their extensive knowledge of the curriculum and experience teaching in all areas of the curriculum over many years. Guided questions helped the researcher to understand general teaching practices as well as to gain greater insight on specific curricular issues. The final area addressed was the learning environment. Data was collected from a survey disseminated to freshman students and interviews were held with graduate students from various labs. The purpose of the survey was to understand students' feelings about the current curriculum.

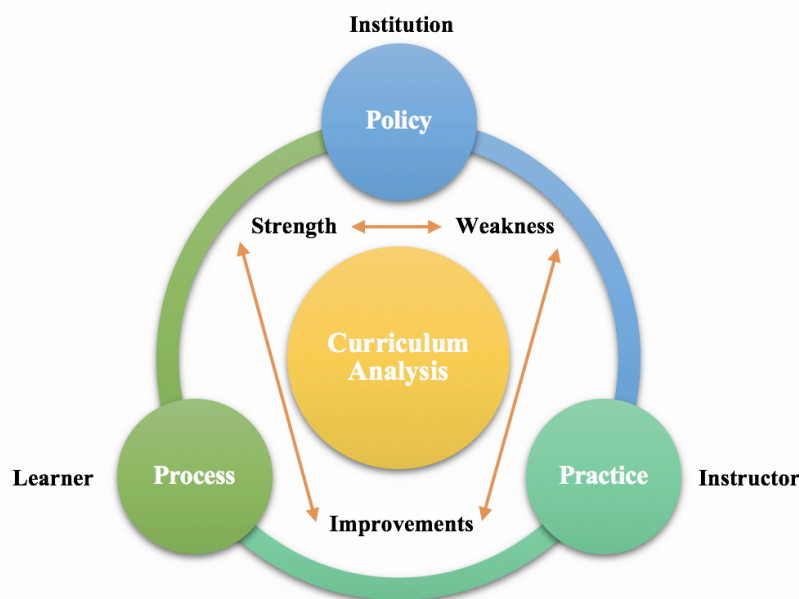


Figure 2: Curriculum Analysis Framework

Discussion

Analysis of syllabi showed that in line with curricular VMDs, the syllabi reflected the underlying philosophy of the university in every course. Students at the freshman level required more teacher guidance as they were not ready for full autonomy. The syllabus for the freshman courses was the same for all teachers so there was little freedom of choice. Textbooks were pre-selected and standardized tests were given to teachers before the start of the semester. Reflecting on learning and progress checks were built into the course to help students understand how they were progressing. Between the second and fourth years of study, students and teachers were given more academic freedom. Teachers incorporated project-style learning and there was more chance for output through discussions and presentations. Graduate students were almost fully independent. At this level, teachers became supervisors and students were responsible for their learning. From the students' perspective, freshman classes were, for the most part, sufficient for advancing their academic skills. For second to fourth year students, they could use the academic skills learned at a more advanced level through discussion or giving presentations. Upon entering the graduate course,

students commented that they had to learn how to explain scientific research using specialized language, and also interact with students from various countries.

Critically speaking, it was also important to recognize curricular weaknesses and then make suggestions for improvements. For the purpose of TaLL, the researcher tried to identify if there were any gaps in the curriculum that could help frame the TaLL program. These gaps became part of the TaLL design. Three main weaknesses which became apparent were the balance of skills, lack of authenticity in language materials and transferable skills for scientific research practices. For freshman students, they mostly preferred a more balanced curriculum with regards to skills. The curriculum focused mainly on writing, listening and vocabulary. Speaking skills were not emphasized and many felt this was the area they needed to improve mostly due to the fact that they had studied reading and listening at advanced levels to pass the examination to enter the university. Communication skills were not a part of the examination, therefore, students found it difficult to express opinions in a logical manner. Lack of authenticity also became a problem later on for students as the language used in academic materials did not prepare them for content-based classes taught completely in English. Many were unaccustomed to the speed and accent of the new teachers and they had not learned discussion or presentation skills in the previous year to participate fully in classes. Therefore, there needed to be more transferable skills for students as they advanced. In particular, skills that were required were logical thinking, response time, presentation and critical thinking skills. With regard to conversational skills, students needed to improve in areas such as expanding on responses, interrupting, turn-taking and building rapport. This was particularly necessary when meeting international students in the same lab. For graduate students, although they learned research skills in their labs, there was not enough exposure to real-life settings or English practice to present their research to both general and specific audiences. As such, these weaknesses or gaps in the curriculum became the starting point for establishing iLearn.

iLearn

The TaLL proposal was developed to match the unique context and gave way to establishing an Informal Learning Environment for Academics and Researchers through Networking (iLearn). The proposed aim of iLearn was to offer a PLE where students could feel comfortable to relax with other young scientists. Two particular areas that would be focused on were social skills and improving scientific English. The organizational method was as follows: Offering workshops to teach basic research skills, followed by weekly peer-consultation and discussion (Figure 3.). Finally, video conferencing was organized to practice skills with other students. Each week, themes were decided on by students and advice was given on specific aspects of research by the group.

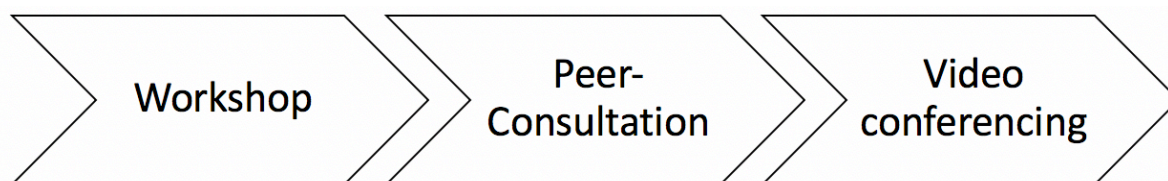


Figure 3: *iLearn Organization*

Conclusion

This research aimed to develop an informal TaLL program to help young researchers practice research skills in an authentic language environment. In order for the program to be implemented, an analysis of the current learning environment had to be conducted to establish gaps that needed to be filled. Once this was completed, the researcher was able to organize a personal learning space where students could meet, share and discuss their research as well as receive critical feedback on their presentation performance. TaLL is by no means an innovative approach to out-of-class learning. Indeed, its merits have been proven empirically over the past five decades. However, there are few programs that focus on the professional side of tandem learning in which participants assist each other in preparing for future real-life situations (conferences, networking, or collaborations with other researchers). This research was only the first step in a longitudinal project. Following this, more workshops will be organized to cover aspects of learning that were not possible in previous workshops. The themes and content will be student-generated and weekly meetings, which have already begun, will encourage students to practice giving critical feedback. The final aim of the research is to organize a day for all participants to participate in a conference, both physically and virtually, to show that they are ready for their future roles as top researchers in the scientific community.

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