

Flexible learning in introductory Chinese language classes through the UBC Tandem Program

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Abstract: This pilot study was designed to explore whether flexible language practice through a Mandarin-English tandem would increase students' willingness to study the target language. A group of native Mandarin speakers and beginner undergraduate Mandarin learners volunteered to meet and exchange languages (i.e., in-tandem learning) after class. All students from the same class who declined to join the tandem functioned as control group. The tandem participants (the experimental group) and the control participants completed the Willingness to Communicate Survey (Pellettieri, 2011) at the beginning of the term and after the tandem finished. A comparative analysis of the results showed that, more than the control group, the tandem participants increased in willingness to communicate in Mandarin inside and outside of the classroom, and had a greater reduction of perceived anxiety to speak the language. The result suggested that offering students flexibility in practicing the language on topics that interest them helps to increase student willingness to practice and use the language.

Keywords: willingness to speak, Mandarin, tandem learning, flexible learning

1 Introduction

The present study explored the use of in-tandem learning (i.e., a pair of students exchanging languages each wants to learn from each other) as an additional component for a beginner Mandarin Chinese language class at the University of British Columbia. The tandem added flexibility to the practice and use of Mandarin because students combined in-class work with outside class practice. The latter increased opportunities for meaningful native/nonnative dialogues in Chinese. Traditionally, a Chinese language classroom supports the development of learner language through various pedagogical activities that enable learners to build language competence gradually. Among the instructional activities, there is preponderance for those that make formal aspects of Chinese more salient (e.g., word order, word formation). Even an activity oriented for student practice can seldom deviate from a focus on form and, more often than not, it will have the teacher leading the activity almost in its entirety (García Mayo and Pica, 2000). Clearly this is not a prerogative of the Chinese language classroom; it most certainly describes the instructional context of other languages such as Spanish (Navarro, 2014).

At no point do we disregard the value of creating supportive contexts for students to exercise communication in the additional language and, in this sense, we acknowledge the value of classroom instruction (Elis, 1994). Yet this does not mean that we are entirely satisfied with the current state of affairs. On the contrary, we support the idea of exploring the many areas in which instructors can turn language

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instruction into a meaningful and realistic experience. As we will see in the next section, studies from an experiential learning perspective have explored ways to increase students' exposure to authentic communication in the target language which, as a result, increased their autonomy as language users (Navarro, 2014 in preparation).

2 Speaking the target language freely outside the classroom

The literature on Spanish Community Service Learning (CSL) in the United States reports on the linguistic, personal, and social gains of students who interacted with native speakers outside the classroom (Boyle and Overfield, 1999; Caldwell, 2007; Hellebrandt and Varona, 1999). For example, Pellettieri (2011) observed that students who completed a series of tasks outside the classroom (e.g., speak with Spanish-speaking friends, acquaintances, and strangers from the community) increased their self-confidence in the use of Spanish, were more willing to speak the language, and increased their spontaneous communication in Spanish. Pellettieri acknowledged that the evidence from her study would not be easily achievable through traditional methodology and urged instructors to engage learners outside of the classroom.

In Western Canada, there has been a series of studies that, like the CSL experiences mentioned above, have yielded positive results in terms of personal and linguistic gains. For example, ten undergraduates from a Spanish conversation class learned about customs and traditions while conversing with seniors at a Hispanic center. The spontaneity with which the dyads unfolded could hardly compare with the conversations students were accustomed to having in class. By the end of the experience there was a general sense that "learners fully profited from the rare opportunity of authentic communication with Spanish native speakers beyond the confinement of the classroom" (Navarro, 2012, p. 1597). Similarly, ten volunteer undergraduates who completed an online Spanish-English tandem with Chilean undergraduates also reported positive feedback from this co-curricular experience outside the classroom (Navarro, 2013). Students in Canada valued learning about Chilean university life and improved their unplanned oral discourse in Spanish.

Further reinforcement of these findings was found in a community outreach project that gathered volunteer undergraduates and high school students to practice Spanish (Navarro, 2014). In a post-activity survey, the undergraduates appreciated the opportunity to collaboratively construct learning-centered relationships with the school students and to explore language teaching in an informal context. They also reported a more pedagogically-informed capacity to plan language activities, use instructional materials, and lead groups. The school students valued speaking Spanish outside class to reinforce content previously studied in class.

In short, there appears to be agreement with respect to the positive gains of having students complete educational projects beyond the classroom. Findings consistently suggest that students gain a new perspective regarding the target language and their role as language users.

3 The present study

This exploratory study investigated student participation in a co-curricular language activity. After class, volunteer Mandarin learners conversed with native Mandarin speakers in a Chinese-English tandem. We hypothesized that by engaging learners in a

tandem experience without teacher supervision, they would increase their enthusiasm to speak Mandarin (i.e., willingness to speak the target language). More precisely, by having Mandarin learners experience authentic communication in a safe and pleasant context without the typical classroom demands, they would become willing to speak the target language whenever possible. We operationalized willingness to communicate as a personality-based predisposition for speaking (or avoiding to speak) the target language whenever it is possible (McCroskey and Richmond, 1987).

The choice of a tandem as the flexible-learning component was triggered by the ample opportunities for students to work independently, producing spontaneous connected speech, and in a format of reciprocal collaboration (Navarro, 2013).

4 Methodology

4.1 Participants

The experimental group (EP) consisted of 12 undergraduate students from an introductory Mandarin Chinese class who joined a tandem voluntarily. They replied to an invitation to practice Mandarin with native Mandarin speakers after class. They also learned that the tandem would not grant them credits or extra marks for participation. In addition, there was a control group (CP) that consisted of 13 students from the same class who declined to participate in the tandem. The group of native Mandarin speakers (MS) was composed of 7 participants (2 males and 5 females) recruited from the existing UBC tandem Language Exchange Program. They all belonged to different study programs and spoke standard Mandarin Chinese.

4.2 Instrument

The instrument used to measure students' performance in the tandem was an adapted version of the Willingness to Communicate Survey (WTC, Pellettieri, 2011). The survey contained a series of statements to test students' preferences in the following six topics: WILLINGNESS to communicate INSIDE classroom; WILLINGNESS to communicate OUTSIDE classroom (i.e., the desire to freely speak in Mandarin); ANXIETY (i.e., discomfort of speaking in Mandarin); MOTIVATION (i.e., toward learning Mandarin) and ATTITUDE (i.e., toward the Chinese community); FREQUENCY (i.e., of communicating in Mandarin outside the classroom and class assignments); and Mandarin speaking ABILITY (i.e., belief of being capable of successfully speaking in different types of situations). The participants had to choose the statement that best described their preference from a Likert scale that ranged from 1 to 6.

4.3 Procedure

4.3.1 Tandem sessions

The seven native Mandarin speakers coordinated and set up schedules for a total of 14 one-hour tandem sessions. The sessions were scheduled on all five days of the week between noon and 6 p.m. to allow for a maximum flexibility. Four different locations on the university campus were chosen to suit the needs of different students. Some locations were closer to classrooms while others were closer to student residences. All

four locations were coffee shops or lounges rather than classrooms to reduce the anxiety often associated to formal instructional settings.

The learners were asked to sign up for at least two sessions for a total of two hours every week. They were also encouraged to go to different sessions before they decided on one speaker, or they could rotate speakers every session. With seven native Mandarin speakers of both genders and different personalities, the learners could choose the speaker with whom they felt the most comfortable. Overall the program was designed to maximize flexibility. However, a maximum of four learners per session was set. The purpose of this maximum was to ensure that each learner received at least some individual attention during each session. In the end, the experimental group attended approximately 15–32 hours of conversation sessions.

Students were encouraged—but not limited to—practicing the topics and grammatical patterns covered in class. Some students chose to go deeper and learn more about language forms explained in class, whereas others chose to learn about and practice colloquial forms. To support the native Mandarin speakers, copies of the course syllabus were distributed. They also received a copy of the instructional textbook and were instructed to review the five lessons selected for the term. They were not, however, required to follow the textbook.

4.3.2 Data collection

For the research component of the study, the experimental and the control groups completed the WTC survey online twice: at the beginning of the term (Pre-test) and at the end of the tandem (Post-test). The aim was to determine any possible change in preferences for both the tandem participants and the control group. Responses of statements for all six categories of the survey were averaged. We then compared the differences of averages for the pre-test and post-test for each category to establish possible variations in preferences between the beginning of the term and the end of the tandem. The overall tendencies are reported in the section that follows.

5 Results

In this section we report the major tendencies found in the tandem participants and the control group. The data correspond to the averages obtained for both groups in all six categories of the survey.

Figure 1 shows the average difference between post and pre-test in all six categories. The dark bars show that the EP, compared with the CP, increased in more willingness to communicate (i.e., the desire to speak Mandarin) inside the classroom (0.38 vs. 0.06) after the tandem. Similarly, they experienced greater increase in willingness to speak Mandarin beyond the classroom when compared with the control group at the end of the tandem (0.71 vs. 0.21). Both tendencies appeared in alignment with the reported scores for anxiety. The EP participants, compared with the CP, reported a greater reduction of their anxiety with respect to the use of Mandarin (0.58 vs. -0.03) after completion of the tandem. This means that the tandem experience helped the EP group to feel less apprehensive of speaking Mandarin in situations other than the protected classroom environment. These results offered preliminary support to the hypothesis that participation in the tandem experience would positively predispose learners for speaking Mandarin whenever possible.

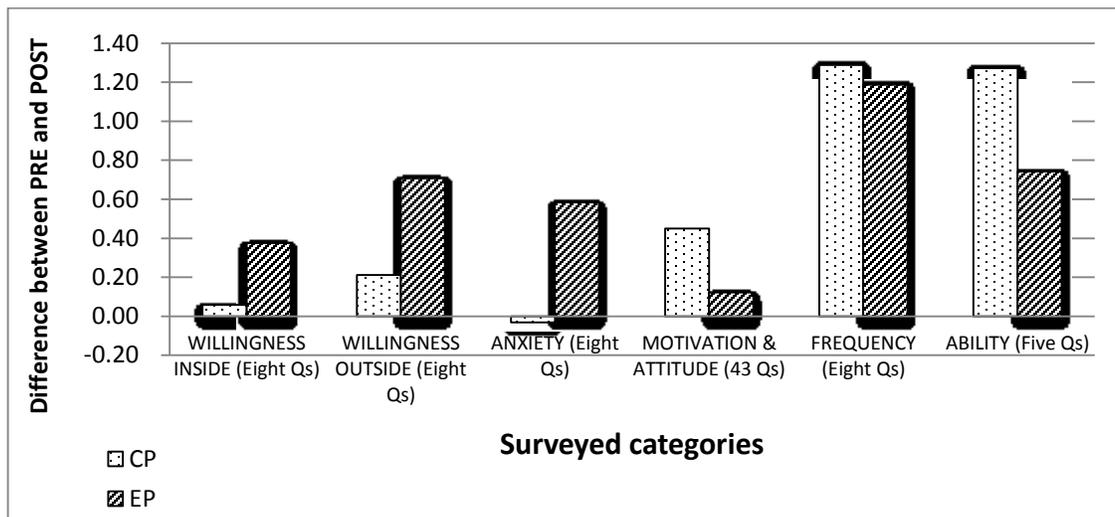


Figure 1 Average difference between the pre-test and post-test for the CP and EP in all six topics investigated.

Figure 1 also shows that the CP group scored higher than the EP in three categories. The white bars indicate that by the end of the term, the CP more than the EP increased in motivation and attitude (0.45 vs. 0.12). This result, however, requires consideration as explained below. As to frequency of target language use, the control group relative to the EP group also scored higher (1.29 vs. 1.19), and self-reported target language ability (1.27 vs. 0.74).

In Table 1 below we report the average pre- and post-test differences broken down for each individual category and drawing attention to what we regard as significant to understanding these results.

Table 1 EP and CP Pre- and Post-test Average Comparison

Surveyed Categories	Grp	Pre	Post	Diff.
1. Willingness to Communicate in Mandarin inside the Classroom				
Average for all eight questions	CP	4.63	4.68	0.06
	EP	4.48	4.85	0.38
2. Willingness to Communicate in Mandarin outside of the Classroom				
Average for all eight questions	CP	3.99	4.20	0.21
	EP	3.30	4.01	0.71
3. Language Anxiety				
Average for all eight questions	CP	4.82	4.78	-0.03
	EP	4.23	4.82	0.58

4. Motivations and Attitudes				
Average for all 43 questions	CP	3.34	3.79	0.45
	EP	3.40	3.52	0.12
5. Frequency of Speaking in Mandarin Outside of the Classroom				
Average for all eight questions	CP	2.61	3.89	1.29
	EP	2.32	3.51	1.19
6. Mandarin Speaking Ability				
Average for all five questions	CP	2.52	3.79	1.27
	EP	2.18	2.92	0.74

5.1 Willingness to communicate inside of the classroom

As shown in Table 1, the tandem participants scored a higher average difference for the desire to speak Mandarin inside the classroom compared with the pre- and post-test results of the CP group. Interestingly, however, the flexible learning component failed to boost students' willingness to ask their teacher when they have a question (the fifth question in the first category of the survey). Table 2 below shows that while the control group remained unchanged between the pre-and post-test, the EP group descended half a point (-0.50) in their willingness to ask their teacher. It is possible that after interacting with native speakers during the tandem sessions, students in the experimental group did not feel the need to address questions with the instructor. They could go to the tandem leaders. A future replication of the study will need to determine whether the latter was simply a random result or it may have a different motivation as discussed further below.

Table 2 Unimproved statement of the EP after the Tandem

Survey Statements	Grp	Pre	Post	Diff.
5. Speak with your teacher about a question you have.	CP	4.85	4.85	0.00
	EP	5.50	5.00	-0.50

5.2 Willingness to communicate outside of the classroom

We reported above that the EP outscored the CP in this category. It is worth mentioning that, in the pre-test, students in the CP group scored higher than the experimental group (3.99 vs. 3.30). Yet, the average difference between the beginning and the end of the flexible learning component suggested that there were more students in the experimental group (0.71) than in the CP group (0.21) that experienced a positive change in their desire to speak Mandarin outside the classroom. As we explain in the discussion section, the tendencies found in this category appear to converge with those in the frequency category. More precisely, the students who joined the tandem likely experienced a low frequency of target language use to begin with; the co-curricular activity was simply a way to reverse this situation.

5.3 Reduced anxiety

The most significant contrast between the two groups with respect to anxiety (i.e., discomfort of speaking in Mandarin) was linked to the statement about “speaking with native speaker friends and acquaintances outside of class” (see table 3 below). In the pre-test, the CP group scored (4.93) that nearly reached the scale of 5 (i.e., “moderately relaxed”), yet these students showed an increase in anxiety level by the post-test (4.62). Conversely, the tandem participants showed the opposite trend. They reported feeling somewhat relaxed before the tandem (4.00), but their average score nearly reached “moderately relaxed” (4.83) after the tandem.

Table 3 Least Anxiety for the Tandem Participants

Survey Statements	Grp	Pre	Post	Diff.
4. Speaking with native speaker friends and acquaintances outside of class.	CP	4.92	4.62	-0.31
	EP	4.00	4.83	0.83

5.4 Motivation and attitude

The category of motivation and attitude is the most complex of the WTC survey with a total of 43 statements. This category exams the participants’ motivation to learn the target language, in this case, Mandarin, and attitude toward the target culture and community. Essentially, there are two types of statements, which draw out responses from two opposite directions. One type asks the respondents to identify if they agree or disagree with a statement that is intrinsically positive, e.g., “I love learning Mandarin.” The second type asks the respondents to express their agreement with statements that are intrinsically negative, e.g., “I hate Mandarin.” Although we appreciate the value of using semantic contrasts to observe consistency across responses, we also acknowledge that the wording of the statements may confuse respondents. Moreover, the scores conflate the notions of motivation toward learning Mandarin and attitude toward the language and culture (or community). With these caveats in mind, we decided to simply group the statements by their basic sense. Table 4 below reports the average of the statements grouped as positive and negative.

As shown in Table 4, for positive statements, both groups scored highest in the post-test. Also, for positive statement, the control group (0.32) scored relatively higher than the experimental group (0.25). It is possible that CP has gained more motivation throughout the term than EP. However, one possible explanation is that the CP was more motivated because they thought that they had much higher Mandarin proficiency at the time of the post-test. One piece of direct evidence for this explanation was the result for the last category of our survey: Ability. As it is shown in the next section, the CP group believed that their Mandarin improved more than what the EP participants believed. It is also interesting to observe that the scores for negative statements of the CP group increased more than those of the EP group. That is, students’ negative attitude toward the target language has grown in the control group at the time of the post-test. This was not the case for the tandem participants whose negative attitude toward the target language very slightly decreased (0.01). In short, the result for the negative statements, when combined with the result for the positive statements, can mean that there are more variations of motivation in the CP group. Some students in

CP group may have higher motivation to study Mandarin and some may have developed stronger negative feelings about the language. On the other hand, the EP group was consistently improving as a whole group.

Table 4 Averages of positive and negative Motivation and Attitude, grouped

Survey Statement Types	Grp	Pre	Post	Diff.
Positive Statements	CP	4.83	5.16	0.32
	EP	4.65	4.89	0.25
Negative Statements	CP	1.85	2.43	0.58
	EP	2.15	2.14	-0.01

5.5 Frequency

The average difference between EP and CP in frequency (i.e., actual communication in Mandarin outside the classroom and class assignments) revealed an unexpected pattern. A closer look at individual statements revealed that both the EP and CP groups increased considerably from the pre- to the post-test (1.19 vs. 1.29). Yet it was the CP group—not the EP group—that scored highest overall. As we briefly advanced above, the CP group concentrated students who might be less in need of extra practice via the tandem activity. We deal with this topic further below.

5.6 Ability

For the Mandarin Speaking Ability category (i.e., the capacity to successfully perform in the target language), both groups scored higher in the post-test as shown in Table 1. The average difference, however, revealed that, at the time of the post-test, the participants in the CP group reported a greater increase in average than the EP (1.27 vs. 0.74) to perform according to the five statements of this category. That is, students who remained in the classroom believed that they have more gains in their command of Mandarin than did the students who participated in the tandem sessions. Of interest is that in the statement about the ability to carry out 5–10 minutes of informal conversation on familiar topics, the EP clearly exceeded the CP (see Table 5 below). The results for other survey statements such as beliefs about the ability to carry out a 20–30 minute conversations should be viewed with caution. Students at this level lack the linguistic resources to hold such an extended dialogue in Mandarin; their responses could be simple speculation.

Table 5 Differences in Ability Between the Experimental and the Control Participants

Survey Statement	Grp	Pre	Post	Diff.
Speak in short (5-10 minutes), informal conversations on familiar topics (e.g., family, weather, where you are from, etc.).	CP	3.69	4.46	0.77
	EP	3.08	4.42	1.33

6 Discussion

Preliminary evidence of this pilot study showed that the experimental group and the control group changed in different ways over the duration of the introductory Mandarin Chinese class. Results of students' responses collected in the WTC survey showed that students who completed the tandem and those in the control group have both experienced positive changes by the end of the term. Of special interest were the tendencies regarding the desire to freely choose to speak in Mandarin if given the opportunity (i.e., willingness to communicate). As reported above, the average difference between the pre- and post-test for the tandem participants was higher than that of the control group. In other words, more students in the experimental group than in the control group answered "very frequently willing" or "always willing" to the idea of speaking with a nonnative speaking classmate to complete a short class activity or of interacting with a native Mandarin-speaking friend. We interpret these tendencies in favour of the hypothesis that by engaging learners in a tandem experience outside class time, they increased their enthusiasm to speak Mandarin willfully. The tandem participants increased their desire to speak Mandarin both inside the classroom (except with teacher about a question). Why could this be so?

At a speculative level we could anticipate that a student who experienced authentic interaction in tandem might feel less inclined to address a doubt about usage (e.g., swear words) with the teacher. The formality of the classroom (cf. the tandem session) may dissuade students to ask about 'real' language expressions. Of importance is to consider the gains in self-confidence experienced by the tandem participants (i.e., they appeared less anxious) that predispose them to the idea of, for example, addressing a native-speaking stranger outside an instructional context. This is an interesting result that appears to stress the benefit of the tandem sessions. Students in the EP group (but not in the CP group) went through the experience of conversing in Mandarin with a person other than their instructor. This knowledge likely contributed to the realization that they could in fact function as Mandarin users to fulfill communicative functions beyond the traditional classroom drills. They therefore felt linguistically capable of reaching out to friends and acquaintances later on.

Despite the temptation to conclude in favour of the benefits of the tandem experience for an introductory Mandarin class, we cannot ignore that, for example, students in the control group, more so than in the experimental group, acknowledged communicating in Mandarin frequently. That is, more students who did not join the tandem self-reported actually communicating in Mandarin either "frequently, a few times a month" or "very frequently, a few times a week". One way to account for this tendency is to think that the control group actually had more students who are also doing some kind of interaction in the target language. That is, students who declined to

invest time after class to converse in Mandarin through tandem were those who, at the time, already spoke with Mandarin-speaking friends or acquaintances in non-instructional situations. Informal communication with students from the control group has revealed that quite a few students asked their native-Mandarin speaking friends to help them with their homework or consulted their relatives for character writing exercises. Thus, to the question of whether they felt more willing to communicate in Mandarin at the time of the post-test, they showed less variation because they continued to communicate frequently in the target language. In contrast, through the tandem, the experimental participants sought out increased opportunities to speak the language, something that they certainly did.

Interestingly, in the survey category of Mandarin Speaking Ability, it was the control group that perceived the greater increase in ability to communicate in Mandarin by the end of the introductory class. The tandem experience helped learners in the EP to increase their ability to conduct short, informal conversations, but the CP perceived an ability for sustaining longer conversations than the EP. We attribute this tendency to the fact that, in class practice, students produce complete utterances sequentially concatenated. Take the case of dialogues that students dramatize in oral practice in class, each student has a designated time to speak and students are expected to respect each other's turn. Clearly, this is not the case in naturalistic conversations outside the classroom. The spontaneity with which students need to produce language to request or clarify information on the spot prepares students for brief and fairly focused interventions. Furthermore, in authentic communicative situations students also learn that speakers often begin their turn with a false start, a truncated utterance, and on occasions body language suffices to convey a whole message.

Although the EP participants' utterances might be simpler and shorter than those of the control group, the theory suggests that they might have more syntactic differentiation and more authentic lexical choices (both of which we are unable to verify at present). This is possibly because the tandem participants might be reaching the bottom of the U-shape developmental process (Lightbown and Spada, 2014; McLaughlin, Rossman, and McLeod, 1983). Students in class, however, might still be simply speaking based on repetition of memorized chunks, or formulaic language. The students, even though they may understand less of what they are saying, still sound more fluent, and even proficient, being at the top left of the U-shape.

7 Conclusion

This pilot study's small participant pool and lack of random selection limit the generalization of its preliminary findings beyond its own participants. The major tendencies suggest, however, that a traditional beginner Mandarin class benefits by having a tandem as an instructional activity beyond the classroom. By the end of the experience, the EP group self-reported being positively predisposed to engage in communication in Mandarin both inside and outside the classroom. As is the case in experimental studies, our data also presented patterns that were less transparent and that should be addressed by a future replication of the investigation. For example, we must more clearly determine whether lower willingness to communicate in the target language (inside and outside the classroom) results from the students already experiencing a high frequency of communication in the target language at the time of testing. It would also be interesting to find out in future studies whether the high-

perceived ability by a group of CP participants would be reflected in their exam results and contribute to sustained interests in the Mandarin language classes.

In short, the study presented suggestive preliminary evidence that offering students flexibility in practicing the language on topics that interest them helped to increase students' willingness to practice and use the language beyond the classroom.

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