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The role of teachers in eTandem in the context of Nordic minority languages in higher education

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Abstract
Our study focuses on the role of the teachers in an eTandem project in a higher education context from the teachers' point of view. The languages included in the project are both minority languages; Finnish in Sweden and Swedish in Finland. Finnish is classified as a national minority language in Sweden. Swedish, on the other hand, is an official language in Finland together with Finnish but there are relatively few speakers. Both contexts lead to challenges in acquiring competence in the two languages, one such challenge being the lack of opportunities to practise speaking and listening. Through practitioner reflection, we examine our eTandem activities and exercises and reflect on how they support students of minority languages in their language learning process. The study shows that the role of the teacher is versatile. We identified the following seven roles: designer, facilitator, guide, minority-language specialist, cultural mediator, language/pedagogy expert, and collaborator.

Keywords: *eTandem, Finnish, Swedish, higher education, minority language, teacher's role.*

1. Introduction

This paper analyses the teachers' experiences in an eTandem project called *Kvarkentandem*, that included teachers and students from four different universities: Stockholm University (Sweden), Umeå University (Sweden), Uppsala University (Sweden), and University of Vaasa (Finland). This article is written by the participating teachers. The project focuses on national minority language students studying Finnish or Swedish in either Finland or Sweden and aims to promote active student learning, enhance communication skills in both languages, and increase comprehension in intercultural communication and exchange.

The eTandem project was integrated into the courses offered at the participating universities at A2 and B2 levels (CEFR, Common European Framework of Reference for languages) in both tandem

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languages. The synchronous meetings between students in Sweden and Finland took place on Zoom. Each meeting had a specific theme with bilingual exercises provided by the teachers beforehand.

This study is an instance of practitioner research (e.g. Menter et al., 2016) as we are conducting reflective inquiry into our own teaching practice. In other words, we are pausing to assess and evaluate our collaborative eTandem project from our own perspective. The aim is not only to review our activities, share experiences, and improve course design but also to contextualise our joint project in the Nordic higher education context and in relation to two Nordic minority languages, Finnish in Sweden and Swedish in Finland. In this sense, our eTandem is also an action research project as it contributes to transformation, empowerment, and development in specific higher education contexts (Burns, 2019; Banegas & Consoli, 2020).

In tandem projects and research, the primary focus has traditionally been on learner autonomy and peer-to-peer exchange (Tardieu & Horgues, 2020; Little & Brammerts, 1996, p. 11; Brammerts, 2003, p. 31), with less emphasis on the role of the teacher, who typically is less involved and provides guidance. Our research question is: What is the role of the teacher in the eTandem project within the context of minority languages in higher education?

We examine our tandem practices and exercises and reflect on how they support minority language students in their learning process. Our findings shed light on the versatile and multifaceted role of the teacher in ensuring a pedagogically meaningful tandem experience for students of minority languages, as well as various other salient themes, including the nature of the exercises, opportunities for differentiation, language and other skills acquired, tasks related to Nordic mobility and language revitalization, and the benefits of digital tools for social interaction. Furthermore, the status of Finnish and Swedish in Sweden and Finland introduces an interesting sociolinguistic situation to work with intercultural communication.

2. The languages of the eTandem project: Finnish in Sweden, Swedish in Finland

The eTandem project is a collaborative effort between Stockholm University, Umeå University, Uppsala University, and University of Vaasa. Launched in the autumn semester of 2020, this project, Kvarkentandem, takes its name from the narrow sea passage Kvarken between Vaasa and Umeå in the Gulf of Bothnia. Kvarkentandem aims to address the need for increased oral communication and authentic interaction in language learning among university students, with a focus on the minority language context. We will reflect on the minority language context especially in connection with the themes “Teacher as a designer”, “Teacher as a minority-language specialist” and “Teacher as a cultural mediator”.

Finnish is one of the national minority languages of Sweden alongside Yiddish, Romani Chib, Sámi languages, and Meänkieli. These languages are spoken by Sweden’s recognised national minorities: Sweden Finns, Jews, Roma, Sámi, and Tornedalians/Kvens/Lantalainens, respectively. Since 2000, individuals belonging to a national minority have enjoyed strong rights to their language and culture. This recognition drives various policies supporting the Finnish-speaking population, such as offering Finnish education in schools, language support by authorities and institutions, and access to services in Finnish (e.g. Vuorsola, 2018). This official status shapes efforts to preserve and revive Finnish within Sweden in light of the historical ties between the two nations. Centuries of migration across the Gulf of Bothnia and the Baltic Sea, and the 600-year period of Finnish being spoken in an area ruled by Sweden until 1809, have fostered this linguistic interconnection.

The attitudes among the majority population in Sweden toward the Sweden Finns have, over the decades, shifted significantly from predominantly negative perceptions to increasingly positive

ones. During the large wave of labor migration from Finland to Sweden in the mid-twentieth century, Finnish migrants were often stereotyped as culturally different, and derogatory expressions as well as negative media portrayals were common (Korkiasaari, 2000, pp. 434–435). By the 1980s, however, the attitudes toward Sweden Finns were already changing: nearly half of Swedish respondents in a 1981 survey considered Finnish lifestyles, values, and culture to be similar to their own. Over time, Sweden Finns have been more positively represented in media and public discourse, alongside a growing perception of Finland as a country competing on equal footing with Sweden. (Korkiasaari, 2000, pp. 434–435.) According to a recent survey (Lageryd & Pesonen, 2025, p. 19), however, only 31 percent of the Swedish respondents were aware of the national minority status of Sweden Finns, indicating that gaps in public knowledge still remain. Moreover, the same study (Lageryd & Pesonen, 2025, p. 72) shows that, while overall awareness has increased, the proportion of respondents who consider the preservation of minority languages to be very or fairly important has declined compared with the 2020 survey, suggesting that while overtly negative attitudes have diminished, sustained support of minority languages and cultures remain fragile.

The Finnish constitution (731/1999 17 §) recognizes Finnish and Swedish as national languages, guaranteeing cultural and societal parity. This recognition stems from Finland's history as part of Sweden and extends to bilingual services in education, healthcare, law, and government. While the Swedish-speaking population in Finland comprises 5.2% and Finnish-speakers make up 86.5% (Tilastokeskus, 2022, p. 8), tensions between the two language communities have shaped their relationship. Efforts continue to balance language use, particularly the "pakkoruotsi" (obligatory/forced Swedish) debate about the necessity of studying Swedish. Studying the other national language is a mandatory school subject throughout all educational levels, and while few Swedish-speakers object to learning Finnish, Finnish-speakers are not always keen on learning the minority language.

A recent study by Härmälä and Marjanen (2023) highlights negative attitudes toward Swedish in Finnish-speaking schools, with declining perceptions of usefulness, especially among boys, who generally seem to be more averse to learning Swedish than girls. However, attitudes toward the Swedish-speaking minority are positive or neutral, supported by national bilingualism for economic and political reasons. The presence of the Swedish People's Party in government has positively impacted the language climate (Herbert, 2023). Härmälä and Marjanen (2023) provide recommendations from their study, emphasising integrating Swedish language and culture into school activities, encouraging language use beyond classes, and fostering collaboration between Finnish and Swedish-speaking schools. ETandem serves as a method to facilitate such collaboration.

3. The participants of the eTandem project Kvarkentandem

We have run the Kvarkentandem since the autumn semester of 2020. At the University of Vaasa Finnish-speaking business students are required to take a compulsory study unit in Swedish called "Business Communication in Swedish" (5 ECTS) as part of their bachelor's degree. The course aims to achieve CEFR levels B1-B2. Students reaching B1 receive the lower grade, while those reaching B2 receive the higher grade, based on nationally developed assessment criteria (Jyväskylän yliopisto, 2018). The University of Vaasa has six full-time Swedish teachers who lead around 20 classes of Business Communication in Swedish, serving over 400 students annually. Since the start of the Kvarkentandem project, three groups have been involved each academic year: one every autumn and two every spring.

In Sweden, three universities participated in the project: Stockholm University, Umeå University and Uppsala University. All of these universities offer Finnish language courses. At Umeå University, the tandem project involves second- or third-year Finnish language students as an optional part of their 3-credit or 7.5-credit (ECTS) course in oral Finnish communication. At Stockholm University, eTandem has been integrated into two different courses where oral Finnish is a mandatory component: a Bachelor-level course for second-year students (15 ETCS), with 12 contact hours in oral communication (6 ETCS), and an optional language course in Finnish (15 ETCS), with 15 contact hours in oral communication (5 ETCS). At Uppsala University, the eTandem exercises were incorporated into a first-year language skills course (7.5 ECTS) or a second-year oral proficiency course (7.5 ECTS), both at the undergraduate level. On both courses, students had 10 x 90 minutes of teacher-led classes. Since its inception in autumn 2020 and until spring 2023, a total of 294 students have participated in Kvarkentandem. Some Swedish students have participated twice, as they have taken Finnish courses at more than one of the participating Swedish universities.

Kvarkentandem consists of four eTandem meetings spread over a four-week period, with each meeting scheduled for 90 minutes. The students arrange the meetings at a mutually convenient time, typically in the evenings or on weekends. Teachers do not attend or intervene during the meetings but provide discussion tasks on various topics for each session. However, the students are instructed to view the tasks as support for creating meaningful conversations rather than strict formulas. If time runs out, they are free to skip some of the tasks.

The Finnish students taking part in Kvarkentandem may not necessarily have an intrinsic motivation to study Swedish, although very few openly resist it. The motivation to study Swedish is likely influenced by the fact that Vaasa is a bilingual city, with approximately 20 % of the population comprising Swedish speakers and almost 70 % in the surrounding municipality (Kommunförbundet, 2023). Additionally, the geographical proximity to Sweden contributes to the prevalence of the Swedish language in everyday life in the region. Another possible reason for the business students' positive attitude towards learning Swedish is the nature of their subject and its job prospects, Sweden being one of Finland's key business partners (Suomen virallinen tilasto, 2021).

The students participating in the tandem project in Sweden constitute a heterogenous group. Their linguistic backgrounds range from native Swedish speakers to native Finnish speakers, Swedish-speaking Finns, as well as second- and third-generation Sweden Finns, with varying proficiency in the Finnish language. Societally, the students also represent a varied group, including young early-stage students, working professionals, and retirees. Therefore, the motivations for studying Finnish vary among students, ranging from personal preferences, interests, language reclamation and revitalization, to professional development. Finnish can be studied at the university level in Sweden as a major, minor, or a complementary subject. Many students choose to pursue part-time or complementary studies in Finnish alongside their work or other fields of study.

4. Tandem in language learning

The origins of the concept of tandem in language learning and cultural exchange can be traced back to the late 1960s and the French-German collaboration that aimed to bridge cultural and linguistic differences in war-torn Europe by bringing together young adults to learn each other's languages (Brammerts, 1996). The practice of tandem soon spread to other countries, and today it is a common alternative or complementary method of foreign language education used in many countries, especially in Europe, and even in some non-European countries (see, for instance, Vassallo & Telles, 2006).

Since its inception, tandem has relied on two underlying principles: autonomy and reciprocity (Tardieu & Horgues, 2020). While the exact definitions of autonomy vary according to different researchers, learner autonomy is an essential part of tandem, compelling the participants to take an active role in the learning process. Tandem also relies heavily on the reciprocity of the participants, with each adopting both the role of a learner and that of a proficient speaker, and taking part in the exchange and to support each other in the learning process (Tardieu & Horgues, 2020; see also Little & Brammerts, 1996, p. 11; Brammerts, 2003, p. 31). In short, tandem can be described as a collaborative, reciprocal, and autonomous method of language learning, consisting of regular sessions of bilingual work for didactic purposes, usually established between two (native or competent) speakers of different languages (Vassallo & Telles, 2006, p. 84–85).

Traditionally, tandem has been used in face-to-face situations. However, since the 1990s, the development of new communication technology has expanded the possibilities of tandem practices over the web, leading to the emergence of virtual or eTandem practices (Tardieu & Horgues, 2020). In the context of language learning, eTandem refers to a language exchange program conducted online between two individuals who are native or near-native speakers of different languages. Tandem is divided into face-to-face tandem and eTandem (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003; Kötter, 2002). In eTandem, language learners typically engage in tandem activities through various video communication tools, such as Skype and Zoom. As Pomino and Gil-Salom (2016, p. 668) point out, learning foreign languages is a constructive, active, and highly interactive process. The possibilities for authentic interaction while attending a language course online are more limited compared to those in more traditional settings. To address this challenge, eTandem can provide a practical solution, especially in higher education.

In recent years, several international eTandem projects have emerged. For instance, the eTandem Projekt Valköln (2015) paired a group of German learners at Universitat Politècnica de València with Spanish learners at the Language Learning Center at the TH Köln (Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016). Another noteworthy project is Teletandem Brasil (2006), which aimed to connect students at São Paolo State University with international students from around the world (Vassallo & Telles, 2006). The role of the teacher, however, has received less attention in research, with some exceptions. For example, Pörn and Hansell (2020) have studied the role of the teacher in classroom-based face-to-face tandem and noted that the teacher functions as a coach, language expert, and facilitator. Our study focuses on the role of the teacher in eTandem and complements Pörn and Hansell's (2020) empirical study through practitioner reflection.

5. Method and data

Our study on the Finnish-Swedish eTandem project employs the methods of practitioner research (e.g. Burns, 2009; Menter et al., 2016), or more specifically those of reflective practice and action research. Banegas and Consoli (2020, p. 176–177) define action research as "a research approach which frames teaching and learning as situated social practices wherein reflection, on the part of the main teaching and learning actors, is crucial to identify issues that affect such practices." More concisely, Banegas and Consoli (2020) identify three interrelated elements in action research: 1) context, 2) agents, and 3) issues. Our analysis encompasses all three aspects, although the focus is on the role of the teacher.

The agents are the teachers, students, and the minority language speakers in society that they are connected to either through heritage or other personal relationships, or through work. The contexts are, on a macro level, the two countries, Sweden and Finland, as well as the higher education

environment. A micro level context is the use of the exercises on Zoom and the challenges the virtual environment sets. The issues consist of the challenges that designing exercises for the specific students and context poses, such as little classroom time, lack of opportunities to speak the language, language loss, negative attitudes, etc.

Documents that can constitute sources of data in action research include language policies, guidelines, syllabi, texts produced by students, course books, or teacher-made materials (e.g. Rose et al., 2019, p. 199–200; also Banegas & Consoli, 2020, p. 183). Our primary data consists of the last category, namely the exercises we collectively designed for the target group and the eTandem activity. The exercises were created in 2020 and have been revised every year since then. Utilising this limited, internal, and readily available data set carries few ethical implications. We analyse the exercises using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2023) and connect our reflections to relevant research within the analysis. The reflection aims to explicitly define our roles as teachers.

6. Analysis

The following section focuses on the teacher's role in tandem by analysing the tandem exercises we designed in the project, and their benefits in the context of Nordic minority languages. Our analysis allowed us to identify seven overlapping roles of the teacher in eTandem (see Figure 1).

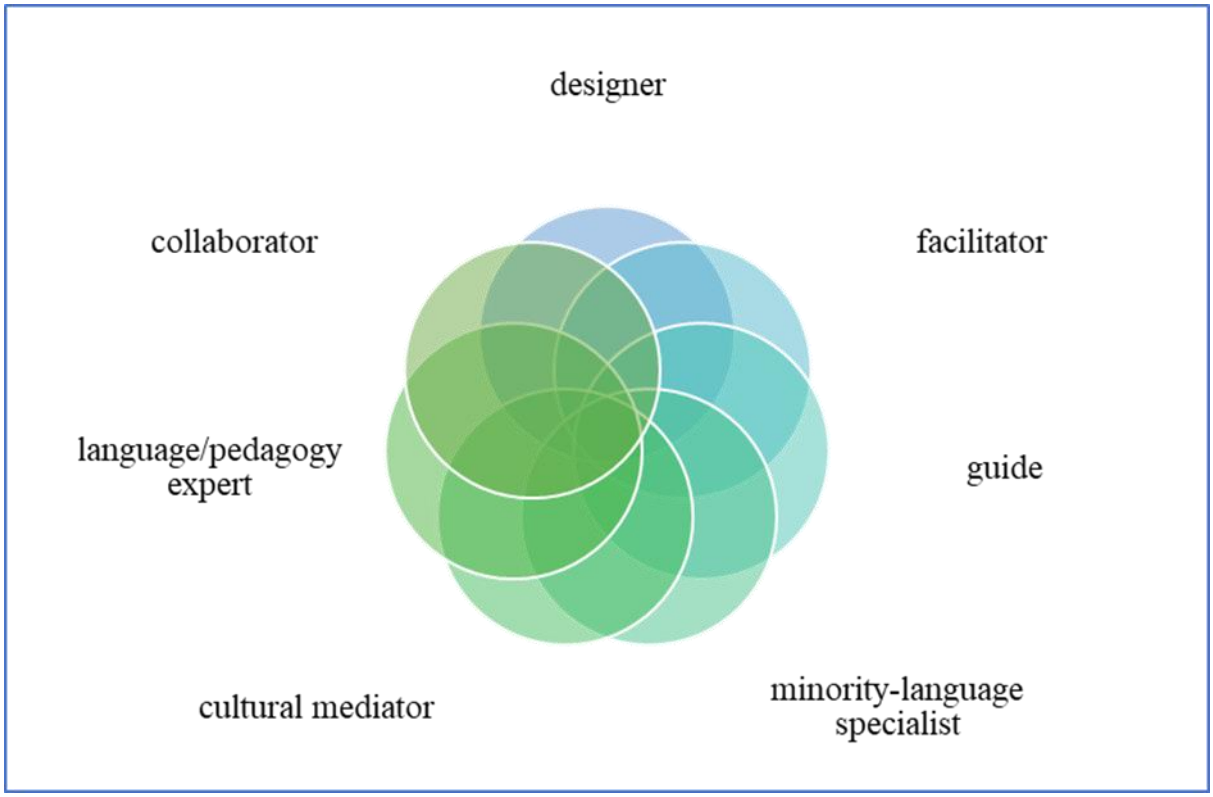


Figure 1. The overlapping roles of the teacher in our eTandem project Kvarkentandem.

6.1 Teacher as a designer

Designing appropriate exercises for minority language students has been a major part of the eTandem project and thus the role of the teacher as a material designer is of essence. These resources have included e.g. vocabulary lists and cultural background information to assist learners in their language exchange. We have even provided oral prompts and discussion topics that are relevant to the interests of students.

According to Brammerts' (1996, p. 11) Principle of Learner Autonomy, "all partners are responsible for their own learning: they alone determine what they want to learn and when". In the eTandem project we have, however, tailored the study material to support and direct the student's language learning process so that they may acquire the skills and abilities necessary to fulfil the course requirements for each university. In addition to this, we have worked with participants to create personalised learning plans based on their current language proficiency levels, goals, and preferences. This ensures that the language exchange is focused and aligned with the learners' needs. We have used the Common European Framework of reference for language (CEFR) to help us define participants' language skills. This has enabled us to pair students with roughly the same level of language skills.

The exercises were planned to support the development of students' languages skills at levels A2-B1 according to the CEFR. At the A2 level, the students are expected to be able to understand and to communicate simple and routine tasks related to familiar topics and activities, such as one's family, living conditions, educational background and job, as well as to handle simple everyday situations and ordinary customer service situations. They should also be able to express one's opinion, attitudes or to exchange information in the most essential matters, see The Evolving Language Proficiency Scale (NCC, 2019). At the B1 level, the learners are expected to be able to, for example, understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, studies and leisure. They should also be able to describe their experiences, events, dreams, hopes and ambitions, as well as to give reasons and explanations for their opinions and plans. They are also expected to be able to deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken.

The aim of the discussions was to allow both participants to practise their target languages reciprocally. The themes of the tandem exercises were chosen to be maximally relevant to the cohorts of students. The four sets of tasks, one for each of the four tandem meetings, followed one important rule: If the task description is in Finnish, the task should be carried out in Finnish, and a task described in Swedish should be carried out in Swedish. This automatically divided the time between the two languages equally, thus encouraging the students to engage in reciprocity.

The first tandem meeting starts with a bilingual interview, with the aim simply being to get to know each other. The questions cover topics such as place of residence, home, family, studies, hobbies, and language skills. The remainder of the first tandem meeting focuses on studies, study-related vocabulary, and differences between studying in Finland and in Sweden. The initial task involves creating a study-related word list complete in both languages, with every second word provided in Finnish and every second word in Swedish. The goal is to learn the vocabulary and be able to use it in the subsequent tasks. In the following task, a study-related phenomenon unique to one of the countries is explained in the first language. The Swedes explain terms like *högskoleprovet* (a national test to apply for higher education in Sweden), *fristående kurs* (independent course), and *studentkår* (student union), while the Finns explain terms like *ylioppilastutkinto* (matriculation examination), and *ainejärjestö* (student organisation). This task serves as a listening comprehension exercise for the non-native speaker, who is also encouraged to ask follow-up questions about the phenomenon. The final task is a traditional discussion about studies in Finland and Sweden, covering topics such as the students' home universities, student life, intake procedures, and distance versus campus studies. This discussion is conducted bilingually.

The topic for the second tandem meeting is customer service situations. The students simulate six situations - three in each language - where one plays the role of customer and the other a staff member. The dialogues should be conducted as naturally and realistically as possible. In the

material, a visit to the hairdresser's, a visit to the health centre, and a situation involving a sudden accident on the street are performed in Finnish. Conversations at a hotel reception, a visit to the movies, and a situation concerning a lost bank card are conducted in Swedish. Naturally, roles and languages can be swapped, and situations can be redone if the students desire.

For the third tandem meeting, students should prepare to present their hometowns - either where they grew up or where they currently live - in the target language. They are encouraged to use resources like Google Maps to show their partners where they live, work, study, and where important sights or places of interest are located. The meeting continues with a task to plan two trips: one to Gotland in Sweden (in Swedish) and one to Lapland in Finland (in Finnish) for a group of 10 university students (5 from each of their home universities). The budget for each trip is 5,000 euro/50,000 SEK, and the plan should include a schedule, transportation methods, accommodation, restaurants, attractions, and activities. The task involves online research, brainstorming, and negotiation.

The fourth and final tandem meeting begins with another listening comprehension task for the non-native participant. Finnish students explain in Finnish how the study grant system works in Finland, while Swedish students are encouraged to ask follow-up questions. Subsequently, Swedish students provide explanations about the various forms of housing in Sweden (right of tenancy, owner-occupied apartments, and owner-dwelling), and the Finnish students pose follow-up questions. This is followed by a general, bilingual discussion encompassing a range of topics including study grants, housing, work, shopping, savings, investments, and inflation. The concluding question encourages students to discuss any current issue or interesting topic of their choice. The deliberate focus on business-related topics during the last tandem meeting is intentional. As the Finnish students in the project are majoring in business, they are afforded the opportunity to discuss such subjects as a part of the Kvarkentandem initiative.

The exercises we designed complement the existing course content by providing an enhancement outside the classroom. Given the limited number of contact hours, it is impractical to delve into each potential topic, skill, and set of vocabulary in great detail during the course. The course themes served as convenient thematic blocks that included preparatory vocabulary as well as role play and dialogue prompts. The chosen tandem tasks were intentional in representing a wide array of spoken genres: presentations, negotiations, question-asking, providing concise answers, explanations, role-play acting, expressing opinions, and presenting arguments to list just a few examples.

Ensuring a diverse range of genres in an eTandem project focused on minority languages, participants can develop a more well-rounded language proficiency that covers various aspects of communication, from formal to informal contexts. Through exposure to diverse genres, participants become more adaptable in switching between different registers and styles of language, which is crucial for effective communication in multicultural and multilingual contexts. The presence of diverse genres also highlights the complexity of language. Participants come to appreciate the linguistic diversity within the minority language and can gain a sense of pride. This is particularly relevant for minority languages, which are often used in a limited number of domains: by practising a wide array of different genres, participants actively contribute to expand the functional domains of the minority language, and thereby support its vitality and relevance in modern society. In addition to this, the project gives participants better real-life communication skills: language learners need to be equipped with skills to navigate various real-life situations. Including genres such as negotiations, argumentations and presentations, and more, prepares participants to use the language effectively in different scenarios. Different genres often reflect cultural norms, values, and social contexts. Including a diverse range of genres exposes participants to the cultural nuances associated with each language, helping them gain a deeper understanding of the cultural aspects embedded in language use.

The choice of themes and task types in the exercises were further shaped by the specific minority context of the project. Several design decisions were directly informed by the sociolinguistic situation of Finnish in Sweden and Swedish in Finland. For instance, customer service situations during the second meeting were included because the ability to use a minority language in everyday service encounters is a key challenge to minority language speakers, and one that directly relates to language rights legislation in both countries. Similarly, the study-related vocabulary tasks, where students explain concepts such as Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test ("högskoleprovet" in Swedish) and compulsory language studies at the Finnish university ("pakolliset kieliopinnot" in Finnish), were designed to address the fact that the education systems in the two countries are closely tied to the status and role of the minority language - the Finnish concept of mandatory language studies, for example, is inseparable from the debate surrounding "pakkoruotsi" (mandatory Swedish studies in Finland). The business-linked topics of the fourth meeting reflect the practical needs of the Finnish students, to whom Swedish is not merely a foreign language but a professional necessity in the bilingual labour market in the Vaasa region. In Sweden, the tasks were designed to meet a heterogeneous group of learners whose relationship with Finnish ranges from personal heritage to professional development, requiring exercises that are meaningful for all these diverse motivations. In sum, while the exercise forms and genres - role plays, presentations, negotiations - are common in language pedagogy, their thematic content was anchored in the lived realities of minority language speakers and learners in the Nordic context.

We do acknowledge the fact that teacher involvement in the design of the tandem activities does to a certain extent compromise one of the cornerstones of tandem learning, namely authenticity of student interaction (see Elo & Pörn, 2021). However, in our opinion the eTandem time can be used more effectively when the activities are carefully designed and chosen for the intended audience.

6.2 Teacher as a facilitator

The teachers in the eTandem organise structured conversations between language exchange partners, facilitating discussions that allow both participants to practise their target languages. We can provide prompts and discussion topics that are relevant to their interests. That is, the teachers work as facilitators who not only bring students together, but also set the schedule, evaluate and match the students into pairs according to their language proficiency levels as well as provide technical information (cf. Pörn & Hansell, 2020). In addition to this, teachers need to work with participants to create personalised learning plans based on their current language proficiency levels, goals, and preferences. This ensures that the eTandem is focused and aligned with learners' specific needs.

The first preparations for the eTandem take place at the end of the previous term when the schedule, participants and the exercises for the tandem during the coming term are discussed and decided on. At the beginning of the new term, the teachers of the cooperating courses then do an approximate assessment of their own students' language proficiency in the target language, and pair up the Finnish and Swedish students primarily based on their proficiency levels. An equal language proficiency level between tandem pairs is desired, although not always possible. If the number of students does not match, groups of three are formed.

Next, the Finnish students are given the email address of their Swedish tandem partner and asked to contact them to agree on the dates and times for the meetings. Special attention is drawn to the one-hour time difference between Finland and Sweden. The meetings are then carried out through the video conference tool Zoom, and the Finnish students are instructed on how to create a room on Zoom, and invite their Swedish tandem partner.

In addition to their role as tandem facilitators, teachers occasionally find themselves assuming the role of practical problem solvers. Often, the challenges encountered by students during tandem meetings were intertwined with difficulties in reaching their tandem partners or scheduling meetings. The logistical problems sometimes necessitate the intervention of teachers, and in rare instances, the reassignment of students to new tandem partners.

Students are strongly encouraged to communicate any issues they encounter in establishing contact with their designated tandem partner or in coordinating meeting schedules. This recommendation aligns with the role of the teacher as a problem solver, as articulated in literature (e.g. Litzler et al., 2018). It has been observed that prior experience with and guidance on the utilisation of selected tools positively correlate with positive outcomes, underscoring the significance of this dimension within the teacher's role. Consequently, instructors should provide assistance to students who may not be familiar with the abovementioned tools.

Remarkably, the utilisation of digital tools seldom poses a concern. Digital platforms serve as an ideal medium for tandem meetings. Notably, Zoom emerges as an eco-friendly, cost-efficient, and valuable way for fostering Nordic cooperation and promoting encounters among minority language speakers. The feasibility of conducting four cross-country trips or accommodating such meetings within individuals' demanding work and life schedules, particularly given that Swedish students learning Finnish are dispersed throughout the nation and beyond European borders, is rendered impossible. The potential and power of new technologies and e-meetings in the revitalisation and support of minority languages has been highlighted in previous studies (e.g. Ka'ai et al., 2013; Henry et al., 2018).

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Zoom has proven especially advantageous, as students have expressed a heightened appreciation for the opportunity to engage with new acquaintances and converse within a virtual environment during periods of social restrictions. Overall, the feedback we have received regarding Zoom and learning platforms offering accessible exercises has been overwhelmingly positive. Reports of technical issues were infrequent, and students demonstrated relative ease in coordinating the four meetings.

6.3 Teacher as a guide

One of the primary roles of the teacher is to serve as a guide, providing instruction to students regarding the goals and principles of eTandem (cf. teacher as a coach in Pörn & Hansell, 2020). Furthermore, teachers are tasked with directing students in the constructive methods of offering corrections and feedback to their respective tandem partners. This guidance aims to support students' learner autonomy and contribute to the development of a reciprocal and mutually supportive tandem partnership (see also Brammerts, 2003, pp. 32–33). To facilitate this process, students are presented with general principles and advice on tandem practices before starting their meetings. These instructions undergo regular updates and adjustments based on student feedback. Given that a substantial number of our students have limited prior experience with eTandem, these instructions serve to alleviate potential apprehension or pressure related to tandem interactions. They help students align their expectations for the experience and encourage them to assume responsibility for their own learning.

The students are instructed to prepare for the tandem meetings on their own, but preparation can also be done by request of the teacher during the general lessons, i.e., by discussing the tandem topics in class or during video meetings with the teacher beforehand. As learners engage in eTandem exchange, they very often encounter challenges specific to the minority language. These challenges could be related to e.g. cultural references, grammar explanations, or culture specific words. Our role as teachers has been to guide them through these hurdles for instance via facilitating discussions with relevant exercises before the tandem meetings.

One notable piece of advice offered to tandem partners pertains to how they address mistakes at the outset of their tandem collaboration. It is recommended that not all errors be corrected immediately to avoid unnecessary disruptions to the flow of conversation. However, repeated mistakes or those significantly hindering communication, either due to difficulty in comprehension, ambiguity, or cultural inappropriateness, should be addressed. Furthermore, it is encouraged that pairs refrain from switching languages out of convenience, even if one participant encounters difficulties, and instead adhere to the designated language for a given task. Equally dividing the time between the languages is also recommended.

Some of the general advice is specific for the situations where the student either is the linguistic role model, or the language learner respectively. As experts or linguistic role models, the students are expected to encourage and support their tandem partner in their learning (see Brammerts, 2003, p. 32–33). They should therefore talk slowly and clearly, show patience, repeat or choose easier words if the partner does not understand. The linguistic role model should try to be just that, a model, and rather give a correct option than point out what is wrong. The students are instructed to keep in mind that the role model is not expected to be able to explain grammar or other linguistic rules and principles, as he or she is not a professional teacher. It is enough to just say how he himself would express something in a given situation.

Most importantly, our instructions stress the fact that a language learner should always dare to try to speak, even though he or she would make mistakes. The fact that both partners are in the very same situation, and switch roles every time they switch language, usually reduces the stress of making mistakes (see also Brammerts, 1996, p. 11). As the focus in tandem is on communicative skills (see Brammerts, 2003, p. 30), the learner is encouraged to be curious on how the native speaker would express things, and to ask questions, although not expecting the partner to be able to give thorough grammatical explanations.

6.4 Teacher as a minority-language specialist

The eTandem project actively contributes to the preservation of minority languages by showcasing their relevance in modern communication. Organising an eTandem in the context of Nordic minority languages presented certain challenges for the project, stemming from the factors such as the distinct needs of student groups attributed to the minority-language status of the tandem languages in both Sweden and Finland. The teacher needs to possess a deep understanding of language. This expertise is crucial when helping learners to navigate the complexities of the minority language they are not yet familiar with.

Being a minority-language specialist as a teacher in this context requires more than linguistic proficiency. It demands an understanding of the sociolinguistic and political context surrounding both languages. The teacher must be aware of the ongoing societal debates that may directly affect students's attitudes and willingness to learn minority languages. In Finland, for instance, the debate over mandatory Swedish studies means that some students may come to the eTandem tuition with even negative attitudes towards the target language which the teacher must be prepared to face sensitively (cf. Härmälä & Marjanen, 2023). Similarly, in Sweden the teacher must understand the complex heritage language situation of Finnish, where students may carry experiences of intergenerational language loss. This sociolinguistic awareness enables the teacher to respond to challenges that would not arise in a typical foreign language tandem between two majority languages, such as feelings of linguistic insecurity, addressing internalised negative attitudes towards minority language, or in some cases feelings of marginalisation, shame and trauma stemming from the minority status and experience (cf. Lageryd & Pesonen, 2025).

Considering that the students wishing to study Finnish in Sweden form a highly heterogeneous group, ranging from complete beginners to native speakers of Finnish, Swedish-speaking Finns, and the heritage speakers of Finnish in Sweden (Sweden Finns), there is a significant need for differentiation. This encompasses the requirement for additional speaking practice on one hand, and the opportunity to employ relatively advanced speaking skills on the other. This was facilitated by matching students from the two countries according to their CEFR levels and occasionally forming groups of three to alleviate pressure for weaker students to speak for the entire session of 90 minutes. This becomes especially important in tandem situations when there are disparities in the language proficiency of the students (cf. Tian & Wang, 2010).

We also achieved successful differentiation by providing students with detailed instructions and the questions in advance, enabling them to prepare before the class. The exercise formats also incorporated an element of improvisation and adaptation: weaker students could follow the script, while stronger ones had the freedom to discuss their chosen topic more extensively. In fact, some students completed the exercises quickly and then engaged in free conversation for the remaining time.

Many learners may feel hesitant or lack confidence when using the minority language. As a teacher and language expert, we can provide reassurance and techniques to boost their confidence in using the language. For instance, the fact that students from the University of Vaasa were able to use Swedish in different speech situations indirectly supports the use of Swedish in Finland. The students are more confident and better prepared to use Swedish in the Finnish society, especially in the bilingual Vaasa region where strong skills in both languages are generally required in working life. On the other hand, students of the Finnish language in Sweden are likely to travel to Finland and use their improved oral skills there on holiday or when visiting family. Speaking with relatives is often indicated as one of the main reasons for studying Finnish. The confidence booster for this group supports language revitalisation and reclamation, allowing the generation that did not learn Finnish to use it again (cf. Vuorsola, 2018).

The tandem meetings and oral practice can contribute to making study and work mobility easier and more appealing through personal encounters with students from universities in the neighbouring country. They may even indirectly support tourism, as customer service situations and speaking in the foreign/heritage language are practised in advance, and the threshold to use the languages is lowered.

6.7 Teacher as a cultural mediator

One of the most important aims in our eTandem project was to promote cross-cultural communication and intercultural competence in our student groups. Intercultural competence, according to Byram (2001, p. 5), entails three main components: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. First of all, a skilful and successful intercultural speaker needs knowledge of social groups and practices in one's own and in the partner's country; secondly, one also needs skills of comparison, of interpreting and relating, as well as those of discovery and interaction, in order to be able to resolve possible misunderstandings, to acquire knowledge of a new culture and cultural practices and to operate knowledge, skills and attitudes during real-time communication and interaction; and, finally and most importantly, a number of so called intercultural attitudes, such as curiosity and openness about other cultures and tolerance of other people's beliefs, values and behaviours. These three components must be complemented by awareness of one's own values and of how they may influence perceptions of other people's values. (Byram, 2001, pp. 6–7.)

To enhance students' intercultural understanding, specific exercises on cultural and societal themes in both tandem languages were incorporated into tandem exercises. The themes "life as a student"

and “housing and money”, for example, allow for comparative discussions, which contribute to intercultural understanding, as the students become ambassadors for their own country and its customs. The theme “hometown” also enabled the students to find out facts about different cities and ways of life.

Although Swedish and Finnish cultures are both Nordic and share many features, there are differences. We addressed this in the eTandem exercises we created by drawing direct attention to eventual similarities and/or differences in social practices, customs, and society. For example, the students were asked to reflect on typical Finnish and Swedish attitudes toward money and ways of spending it, thus encouraging discussion on cultural differences and even stereotypes. The students were also given a task to compare and explain certain - seemingly similar - aspects of the educational systems in both countries, allowing for an increase in intercultural knowledge. Our eTandem exercises were thus very much in line with the original ideals behind tandem, aiming to promote cohesion on the European level (cf. Schenker, 2012).

The intercultural dimension in our eTandem project extends beyond the comparison of national cultures. The status of Finnish as a national minority language in Sweden and Swedish as a national language in Finland shows an additional layer of intercultural complexity. Students navigate not only the differences between two different countries, but also experiences and identities associated with belonging to or interacting with a linguistic minority within their own country. For instance, Sweden Finns in Sweden may share experiences of language loss in their family or revitalisation. In Finland, Swedish-speaking Finns fall into a middle ground between Finns and Swedes when it comes to identity and cultural traits, being able to serve as a bridge between the two groups in several aspects, while at the same time dealing with the minority struggle of continually being overlooked by both majority groups. These perspectives enrich the cultural exchange and provide students with a deeper understanding of how language, identity, and minority status are intertwined in the Nordic context.

6.8 Teacher as a language and pedagogy expert

According to Pörn and Hansell (2020, p. 543), like in all language instruction, tandem teachers are considered language experts. However, in this study, we argue that teachers’ expertise in eTandem extends beyond merely dual language competence in the target language and that it actually deals with a broad spectrum of other domains, including pedagogical and institutional knowledge. Their expertise encompasses various areas, including multimodal pedagogy, drama pedagogy, translanguaging, pragmatics, educational systems in both tandem countries, educational platforms, and media. Language learning is most effective when it addresses multiple dimensions of language, including grammar, text genres, vocabulary, cultural understanding, translanguaging approaches, and pragmatic skills. A diverse range of genres facilitates this holistic learning approach.

The exercises encompassed the training and activation of various oral language skills. For instance, the theme of hometown and travel involved both presentation and negotiation skills. Students introduced their hometowns, followed by negotiating and planning the optimal way to utilise a sum of money given by a student organisation for travels to Lapland in Finland and Gotland in Sweden. In addition to oral skills, the tasks encompassed information retrieval, such as gathering facts about hometowns, and other multimodal skills, including using maps to plan trips, schedules, and other prompts for role-play situations. This further enhanced student learning as the exercises combined visual/pictorial and auditory/verbal modes, which has been shown to be advantageous for learners’ skill development and to enhance their multimodal literacy (see Guichon & Cohen, 2016 for a

literature review on the benefits of multimodality). We consciously designed the exercises to promote multimodal literacy.

Pragmatics and politeness were trained and applied when meeting new people and initiating tandem sessions, as well as during role-playing or when participants needed to ask their tandem partner to repeat or explain. Listening skills were trained through real interactions, rather than textbook-style listening exercises. Students were also prompted to provide feedback to the teacher or the group, either formally as a mandatory task at the end of the course, as self-evaluation, or informally. Previous studies have demonstrated that retelling is an effective method for reinforcing student learning. Lastly, translanguaging could be considered both a language skill and a relevant, advantageous linguistic practice. Translanguaging refers to bilingual or multilingual language learners using their full linguistic repertoire in class for positive effects (cf. García & Wei, 2014). During tandem sessions, students freely switch between languages in ways they find suitable. Understanding the linguistic context is essential for effective communication and helps learners use the language appropriately in different situations not only in terms of grammar and vocabulary but also in terms of pragmatics and politeness (e.g. which greeting to use, how to negotiate and behave at meetings) (cf. Pörn & Hansell, 2020, pp. 539–543). Part of the expertise is also introducing to different varieties of Finnish (authentic colloquial language or regional dialect as opposed to adapted spoken language in textbooks or written language) and Swedish (Swedish spoken in Sweden as opposed to Swedish spoken in Finland). For example, the heritage-language learners of Finnish in Sweden may have only heard one type of Finnish spoken by their parents at home or read textbooks in standard written Finnish before, while the students of Swedish in Finland may not be used to hearing regional variation as they may have learned the variety spoken in Finland. The authentic eTandem exercises provide an excellent opportunity to practise understanding using colloquial and regional spoken language.

As language pedagogy experts, we ensured that the students reflected on their learning through follow-up, that took place during normal lessons or in the general course work. There are several different ways to do it: talking about the experiences during the lessons, discussing them on a forum on the online learning platform, writing a learning diary or other text, or recording a video or audio about the tandem experience.

To summarise, teachers are dual experts in tandem learning by combining a wide range of linguistic knowledge with language pedagogy skills. This enables us to create a learning environment where students are maximally supported in their language learning process.

6.9 Teacher as a collaborator

The eTandem project has resulted in a new form of collaboration that ranges from collegial and pedagogical support to scientific and institutional cooperation among participating teachers, two countries, and four universities. Addressing emerging concerns and facilitating open communication between partners has been crucial. Working as collaborative teachers in an eTandem project focused on Nordic minority languages involves actively engaging with the project's goals and participants to create a successful language exchange experience. In projects like this, it is important to understand the objectives and ensure our teaching approach aligns with these goals, including promoting language exchange and mutual learning between participating teachers.

During the eTandem project, we collaborated with our counterparts in other language institutions in various ways. First, we worked together on curriculum design, creating engaging tasks and topics that resonate with language learners and their cultural backgrounds. We regularly discussed participant progress, challenges, and adjustments needed in the exercises. Second, we jointly created all relevant resources, such as vocabulary lists and learning materials. The open communication channels provided a more comprehensive learning experience for the students and

the teachers. In our discussions, we have been able to address language skills evaluation and questions about cultural sensitivity, such as how to navigate potential cultural barriers and encourage participants to embrace diversity and respect differences. Third, we collaborated with our counterparts to monitor participant progress, discussing how to assess language development, communication skills, and how to offer constructive feedback.

Throughout the project, we collaborated on a reflective process. As early as the first eTandem session in 2020, we evaluated the project's success, gathered feedback from participants, and identified areas for improvement in future iterations. During the project's peak, we began exploring possibilities for ongoing collaboration beyond its duration. We participated in pedagogical and scientific conferences, expanding cooperation between participating universities, and conducting tandem-based research together. The collegial support during the project has been invaluable, as has the reflective practice in connection with this study.

7. Summary and conclusions

Our study shows that the role of the teacher is more involved and versatile than previous studies on tandem or eTandem learning show. Pörn and Hansell (2020) identified three roles for the teacher in classroom tandem, namely facilitator, language expert, and coach. Our study adds designer, minority-language specialist, cultural mediator, pedagogy expert, and collaborator to the list. We feel that *guide* is a more appropriate term than Pörn & Hansell's *coach* for the type of support we provide in eTandem as it implies that the learners have more autonomy and their performance is not monitored like a sports or work goal.

One should note that the role of a teacher or the emphasis on a certain role in eTandem can vary depending on the specific circumstances and goals of the language exchange. For example, sometimes the teacher may not design exercises or collaborate to the extent that we did. Teachers can adapt or emphasise a certain aspect of their role to meet the needs of the participants and facilitate a successful language learning experience. Furthermore, one should always remember that in tandem and eTandem, the primary focus is on peer-to-peer language exchange, where participants learn from each other.

At the end of each eTandem session, we gathered feedback from participants to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. We have used this feedback to refine our approach and improve the experience for future participants. The Kvarkentandem project has received positive feedback from both Finnish and Swedish students, with some students identifying it as the best part of their courses. The project has helped to create connections between both students and language teachers at different universities and in different countries, and to promote cross-border cooperation and understanding.

The eTandem meetings can advance positive attitudes towards minorities and knowledge of Finnish in Sweden and Swedish in Finland, and may contribute to the removal of mental obstacles and prejudices. Analyses of classroom interactions and student interviews are needed to study this further. We focused on minority languages in a Nordic higher-education context from the teachers' perspective. By taking on the role of a minority-language expert in an eTandem project, we have been able to play a pivotal role in preserving and promoting these Nordic minority languages while enriching the language learning of the participants. The present study could be expanded by interviewing students about the role of the teacher, collecting data from other teachers about their

experiences about tandem or eTandem, and comparing the impact of a less formal tandem exchange with our eTandem on learning.

In a minority-language context, organising tandem activities requires that the status of the minority language be systematically taken into account in the design of the tasks, their implementation, and the guidance provided to students. Tasks should be connected to authentic contexts of language use and to the societal position of the language in order to highlight the relevance of the minority language in students' everyday lives and future professional settings. In this respect, the teacher's role as a guide who is sensitive to possible language attitudes and insecurities and supports students' linguistic agency is particularly important. From a broader perspective, such a pedagogical approach can contribute to strengthening the vitality of minority languages. Practising Swedish in authentic cross-border interaction, for example, reinforces its position in Finland not only as a formal requirement of education but also as a concrete communicative competence and a functional language in Nordic cooperation. Tandem can thus serve not only as a method of language learning but also as an educational practice that supports the continued relevance of minority languages in higher education and beyond.

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