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**eCLASSROOM TANDEM – DEVELOPING TANDEM AS A MODEL FOR SECOND  
LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN A SCHOOL CONTEXT**

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**Abstract:** *The aim of the paper is to describe the challenges in developing Classroom tandem as a model for second language education for virtual learning environments in Finland. Finland is officially a bilingual country, where both the Finnish-speaking and the Swedish-speaking language groups are taught parallel in monolingual schools according to the law. However, both language groups learn the other second national language as a subject in school. Classroom tandem as an instruction model for second language education was introduced in Finland in 2012, based on tandem as a language learning model, meaning that two persons learn the languages of each other in reciprocal cooperation and thereby switch languages. The tandem partners act in turns as the learning part in their second language and as the model and support in their first language. (Karjalainen, Pörn, Rusk & Björkskog, 2013). Tandem is divided into face-to-face tandem and eTandem (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003; Kötter, 2002). Classroom tandem relies strongly on physical face-to-face meetings. However, these meetings are not possible to organize in all schools in Finland, due to the lack of closely located Finnish- and Swedish-speaking partner schools. Therefore, eClassroom tandem is now being developed in cooperation with language teachers as an applied virtual form of Classroom tandem. The challenge in developing eClassroom tandem mainly includes issues dealing with technology, task design and virtual cooperation between tandem partners. In order to increase the understanding of potentially existing virtual cooperation in all Swedish-speaking upper secondary schools in Finland with Finnish-speaking schools and schools abroad, a survey (based on interviews with 34 principals in 2015) was made. The results show that the most typical form of cooperation is however physical visits between schools, while extended virtual cooperation is rare. According to the principals' view the cooperation is however not always pedagogically organized, and therefore there is a need to pedagogically develop the virtual cooperation practices for language education. One possible model for this cooperation is eClassroom tandem, which increase the opportunities for second language learning in authentic situations with students of the same age, even in strongly monolingual areas.*

**Keywords:** *eClassroom tandem; tandem learning; second language education*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Bilingual solutions in education have been an intensively discussed topic in Finland during the last years. Finland is officially a bilingual country with two official languages, Finnish and Swedish. Both language groups are guaranteed a constitutional right to education in their respective first language. However, the two language groups are taught parallel in monolingual schools according to the law and learn the other national language in school as a second language. During the past years a debate about the second language education in Finland has been intensive and the second language education has for example been criticized for being form and grammar focused. Parallel to this, the debate has focused on the possibilities of bilingual schools and discussed the already existing co-located schools, where Swedish-medium and Finnish-medium schools share premises.[1,2] However,

previous research in Finland has shown that co-located schools do not automatically lead to contact between language groups, and therefore systematic cooperation between schools and teachers is needed to create possibilities for second language learning [e.g. 3]. Parallel to the discussion of the bilingual solutions in education, the Finnish education system is also going through changes. In 2016 a new curriculum is introduced for the upper secondary school, which emphasizes e.g. learning together with other students, authentic language learning and technological knowledge more than the previous curriculum [4]. The upper secondary schools are also in front of a challenge, when the national matriculation examination in the end of the upper secondary school is gradually being digitized starting from the fall of 2016. One potential model for second language education that puts together bilingual cooperation, authentic language use and learning, and technology is eClassroom tandem. The aim for this article is to describe the challenges in developing eClassroom tandem as a model for second language education for virtual learning environments in Finland.

### **1.1 Tandem and eTandem**

Tandem within language education entails that two persons learn each other's languages in reciprocal cooperation and thereby switch between languages. This means that the tandem partners in turns act as the learning part in their second language and as the model in their first language. The fundamental principles of tandem are: *reciprocity*, implying that both partners should gain of the cooperation and *learner autonomy*, implying that students parallel to language learning also learn how to take responsibility of their own learning process, to steer, to plan and to evaluate it. [5,6,7] Tandem learning is based on a social-interactional perspective on language learning [e.g. 8] which means that language learning occurs in social interaction with other individuals [9,10]. This view of language learning is also supported in the new national curriculum [4].

Tandem is nowadays divided into two forms: face-to-face tandem where students meet in physical meetings and eTandem where the partners meet virtually in different forms [5]. Since year 2000 eTandem has started to establish as a tandem form on the side of face-to-face tandem, due to the quick technical development, which has created further possibilities to communication between individuals. In the beginning eTandem was mostly asynchronous contact, i.e. contact via email and was therefore mostly based on written communication. During the last decade, eTandem has quickly developed to also include synchronous contact both oral and written between two or more individuals, which is possible due to for example different virtual learning environments and video conversations. [5,11] On an international level eTandem has earlier been studied mostly on a university level [12,13].

In Finland eTandem has so far been applied only limitedly and mainly on university level. Among others Ojanen [14] has studied eTandem in Latvia by matching eTandem partners from the University of Helsinki to Latvian students learning Finnish. This resulted in a successful cooperation where students were communicating through Skype during their spare time. Other cooperation has also been done between the University of Helsinki and the Vilnius University in Lithuania, where the main communication channel has been email [15, see also 16]. In classroom context among younger students eTandem is still in a development process.

### **1.2 Classroom tandem and eClassroom tandem**

As a model for instruction in the second national language, Classroom tandem is based on cooperation between a Finnish- and a Swedish-medium school. The model was introduced in Finland in 2012, after good experiences in Tandem among adults. In Classroom tandem the language instruction is organized in mixed groups where a Swedish- and a Finnish-speaking student form a tandem dyad. The students therefore switch roles from the learning part in their target language to support and model in their first language. During the Swedish lessons the Swedish-speaking student functions as a support and gives a model to the Finnish-speaking student and vice versa. Therefore, except developing their skills in the second national language, the students are also developing their linguistic awareness'. Through metalinguistic discussions with a second language speaker the students also get a different perspective on their own first language. This favours the learning process also in other language studies. Classroom tandem in nearby schools has been a successful and a motivating working method, which is based on student-centered instruction and which creates varied possibilities for learning. [7,16]

Classroom tandem rests highly on the idea of physical meetings. These physical meetings are however not possible to organize in all schools. In Finland all schools do not have the same possibilities to cooperation due to often long distances between schools and a nearby partner school is missing especially in the strongly Finnish- and Swedish-dominated regions in Finland. Therefore, a virtual form of Classroom tandem is now being developed to make Classroom tandem accessible to all schools. The eClassroom tandem project entails cooperation between researchers and language teachers that are active partners in the project engaged in action research. In the beginning of the development process a survey was made with 34 principals in order to increase the understanding of already existing both physical and virtual cooperation, and the challenges in it, between Finnish- and Swedish-medium schools.

## **II. METHODS**

The empirical data of the survey was collected in the fall of 2015. The data consists of phone interviews with all principals (34) in the Swedish-medium upper secondary schools in Finland. The amount of Swedish-medium upper secondary schools in Finland is 36, but two principals are principals for two schools. The interviews were done by one researcher and the principals were all answering same questions that were prepared beforehand. The principals had also the possibility to tell by themselves about the cooperation projects in their schools. The primary aim with the interviews was to get an idea of the existing cooperation with the Finnish-medium schools, but also cooperation with other Swedish-medium schools and schools abroad were taken into consideration.

The decision to only interview the principals in the Swedish-medium schools was made based on the fact that the amount of Finnish-medium schools, and thereby also Finnish-medium upper secondary school principals, is around 400 and thereby it would have been too time consuming to interview all of the Finnish-medium principals as well. The aim of the survey was also fulfilled by only interviewing one partner of the cooperation we were interested in, i.e. the Swedish-medium schools. The researcher doing the interviews made notes during the phone calls, and after each call more specific notes were made. The interviews were not recoded and the principals were all asked for permission to use the information from the phone calls in a research purpose. After the data collection the more specific notes from the phone calls were all analyzed and categorized based on whether there was any cooperation, the character of the cooperation and the type of the virtual cooperation.

## **III. RESULTS**

One of the aims with the survey was to find out whether there is physical or virtual cooperation between the Swedish-medium and Finnish-medium schools, or Swedish-medium schools and schools abroad. In this chapter we present the results in three categories. The first category presents the existing cooperation, the second category the character or type of the cooperation and the third the virtual cooperation.

### **3.1 The cooperation with other language groups**

The results of the survey show that almost all (34 of 36) Swedish-medium schools do have some kind of cooperation with Finnish-medium schools or with schools abroad, which is a significant number. Cooperation with Finnish-medium schools (29/36) is only slightly more common than cooperation with schools abroad (25/36). In more than half of the schools (20/36) the cooperation is done both with Finnish-medium schools and with schools abroad. It is also worth to notice that the other part of the cooperation is not always another upper secondary school. For instance the cooperation in one school is done with a Finnish-medium primary school where the Swedish-speaking students teach the younger pupils in Finnish during some lessons e.g. Physical Education. In another school the cooperation partner is a Finnish-medium university.

### **3.2 The character of the cooperation**

The results show that the most typical form of cooperation was a so called “visiting cooperation”, i.e. reciprocal visits between the schools. Typical for this type of cooperation is that the schools visit each other once or twice a year. This kind of cooperation is common both with Finnish-

medium schools (24/36) and with schools abroad (23/36). Many schools also have this type of cooperation with both Finnish-medium schools and with schools abroad (18/36). Many principals described these visits as general visits, where the students who come for a visit attend all classes of a group in the school during the time they are there. Some principals were concerned about the pedagogical value of this kind of cooperation, because it was typical that the cooperation already had existed for many years without major reforms and they were usually not connected to any specific subject. Some of the schools are co-located with Finnish-medium schools and in these schools more activities between the language groups are organized together.

The character of the cooperation	Amount of upper secondary schools (total 36)	
Visiting cooperation (schools abroad)	24	
Visiting cooperation (Finnish-medium schools)	23	
Cooperation in language education	15	
Practical cooperation with Finnish-medium schools (courses together etc.)	12	
Cooperation in other subjects	8	

However, there are also exceptions, where the visits are pedagogically organized. Some of these are for instance visits where students could spend many weeks in the partner schools. Many of the schools also reported that their cooperation is connected to some specific subject, which in 15 schools was a language (15/36). In this language related cooperation it is common that the students meet during visits, but the focus is on language learning. Also schools that offer tandem are included in this category.

One third of the schools also has practical cooperation with other schools (12/36). This entails for example that courses are taught together or that the students can attend courses in a Finnish-medium upper secondary school. In some cities some languages are taught together (e.g. Spanish, Russian). Cooperation also exists within other subjects than languages. According to the principals there is however cooperation within other subjects only in eight schools (8/36). In this category e.g. cooperation in Chemistry or Psychology is included with Finnish-medium schools or schools abroad.

### 3.3 The virtual cooperation

Like physical visits also virtual cooperation with Finnish-medium schools or schools abroad is quite typical in the Swedish-medium schools in Finland. Of all 36 Swedish-medium upper secondary schools 19 report that they have some kind of virtual cooperation. Even though many schools have virtual cooperation, it is usually only for keeping in touch between the physical visits. In 13 (of 19) schools the communication with schools abroad between the visits or before them happens virtually. This includes all kind of virtual communication, e.g. emails and discussions in Facebook groups. As for Finnish-medium schools, this type of virtual communication exists in 9 (of 19) Swedish-medium schools. It is typical for the schools that they want their students to know each other before the physical visits. However, it is worth mentioning that this virtual communication usually always is written. Oral communication e.g. through video calls is much rarer.

In only 3 schools (of 19) the cooperation is mainly or only virtual. In these schools the cooperation is carried out through Skype or common blogs. According to the principals all this communication takes place with schools abroad. The cooperation that exists inside of Finland seems to concentrate on physical visits and the virtual cooperation is only seen as something that happens in-

between them. However, only one principal mentioned a project where all contact is virtual and the students never have met each other physically.

### III. CONCLUSIONS – THE CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING eCLASSROOM TANDEM

The Swedish-medium upper secondary schools can be seen as active when it comes to cooperation with Finnish-medium schools and schools abroad. However, the virtual communication in these schools is not that developed that it could be, and from the principals' view there is a need and a will to find new learning models. In these already existing cooperation projects the focus is usually on getting to know new people from other language groups and its culture. The schools are however interested in developing the already existing projects in order to create more learning opportunities for their students. However, the principals see the new curriculum [4] and the digitalization of the matriculation examination as challenges for the upper secondary school teachers, since teachers already have a heavy work load. Another challenge for a good cooperation is the individual cooperation between teachers, since every cooperation project usually needs at least two committed teachers to be successful.

From a researcher perspective the development process for eClassroom tandem consists of different aspects. The first challenge that also has been pointed out in previous research in eTandem [17] is the challenge with *technology*. All schools in Finland do not have the needed technological equipment for a proper virtual communication in language education, which also was mentioned by the principals as a challenge when communicating virtually with especially schools abroad. Even if the schools do have the needed equipment some efforts need to be made to achieve technological solutions that work properly in a classroom with over 20 students. This is not always as easy as it seems, due to e.g. the internet capacities in schools. Another challenge in eClassroom tandem is the *task design*. The tasks formed and tested in Classroom tandem cannot be directly implemented to eClassroom tandem and many of the tasks need to be formed again to work in a virtual environment. The third eventual challenge in eClassroom tandem can be identified as a challenge in the *cooperation within the tandem dyads*. When students meet virtually, the cooperation might not be as fluent as during physical meeting, due to problems with e.g. technology. This might in the end result in a lower motivation among the students. It has however been a pleasure to notice, that the schools have a positive attitude for virtual solutions in language education in upper secondary school and that they would gladly develop and continue with their already existing cooperation projects.

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