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Extracurricular Tandem as a Powerful Tool for Enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competence

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ABSTRACT

Regular interaction with the representatives of the target language is a key driver in enhancing linguistic and intercultural competence. This study explores the frequency of communication between Kazakhstani students and native speakers, additionally examining their emotions during foreign language interaction. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the efficacy of extracurricular tandem in fostering intercultural communicative competence and the challenges faced by students when studying languages in extracurricular tandem. Following the quantitative method of scientific research, the authors conducted an anonymous survey of 587 foreign language students. To create an opportunity for intercultural communication, the research group developed the website and initiated an extracurricular language tandem pilot project between foreign and local students. The survey findings revealed that only a small portion (11%) of students regularly communicate with native speakers, while the majority of respondents (73%) experience both language difficulties and anxiety during interactions. The extracurricular tandem project provided positive outcomes, with students reporting enhancement in both their linguistic skills and understanding of the target culture. The project contributed the development of friendships and boosted confidence in using the target language. Nevertheless, students encountered some difficulties

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related to organizational aspects. This study can guide educators and educational institutions in creating conditions that promote intercultural exchange among students and enhance their intercultural communicative skills.

Keywords: Tandem; Intercultural Communication; Communicative Skills; Intercultural Communicative Competence; Student Mobility

1. Introduction

The contemporary world is undergoing rapid growth in globalization, which brings cultures closer together, accelerates the internationalization of higher education, increases international cooperation, and stimulates the introduction of new technologies and innovative teaching methods. Therefore, UNESCO pays great attention to intercultural education, namely the formation of intercultural communicative competence. In this regard, UNESCO (2006)^[1] developed guidelines for the introduction of intercultural education in the learning process, which focused on “increasing direct contacts and regular exchanges between students and teachers from different countries and cultural environments; implementing joint projects between higher educational institutions of different countries in order to solve common problems; creating international networks of students and researchers working towards the same goals”. These recommendations contribute to the formation of communication and cooperation skills without intercultural barriers.

Intercultural communication is impossible without knowledge of foreign languages, therefore, there has been a significant shift in approaches to teaching foreign languages. The traditional focus on grammar and vocabulary is increasingly being supplemented and replaced by an emphasis on intercultural communication. In accordance with the new intercultural paradigm of education, the “Concept of Foreign Language Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK)” (2006)^[2] was developed in Kazakhstan. In accordance with which, the main goal of teaching a foreign language in the absence of a linguocultural and sociocultural environment is the formation of “a secondary linguistic personality, ready and capable of intercultural foreign language communication”. Numerous studies by linguists confirm that the formation of cultural and inter-

cultural competence occurs during the study of foreign languages^[3-5], as well as interactions with representatives of other cultures^[6].

The most studied foreign language in Kazakhstan is English. It is taught in 90% of schools and universities in the country. However, according to the report of the Bureau of National Statistics of the RK for 2021, 80.1% of the population speaks Kazakh, 83.7% speaks Russian, and only 35.1% speaks English. Moreover, pursuant to the results of the international ranking among non-English speaking countries by level of English proficiency “EF English Proficiency Index 2023”, Kazakhstan is ranked 104 out of 113 and is included in the group of countries with a very low level of English proficiency. Consequently, the level of intercultural communicative competence is also at a very low level. The outcomes of the rating and statistical data manifest the ineffectiveness of the methods used in teaching foreign languages and the failure to achieve the set learning goals. We consider it necessary to revise the approach to teaching foreign languages and initiate more effective contemporary educational tools, such as tandem learning.

It is worth noting that Kazakhstan is a bilingual country with rich cultural diversity and multilingualism. Historically, it is home to more than 120 ethnic groups from the former Soviet Union. Thus, analyzing the above statistics, it is obvious that regular language and intercultural exchange is necessary to improve language competence.

In recent years, the internationalization of higher education, including the internationalization at home, has been gaining momentum in Kazakhstan. The process of internationalization at home is aimed primarily at providing the vast majority of students who do not spend time abroad with international contacts and creating an international environment for strengthening their intercultural

linguistic and academic skills^[7].

Providing local students with international contacts and creating an intercultural environment became possible due to the increasing academic mobility of students and teaching staff. Since the accession of Kazakhstan to the Bologna Process, the number of incoming foreign students and faculty has been increasing annually. According to the Ministry of Education of the RK, in 2021 the number of foreign students studying in Kazakhstani universities has reached 30 thousand people.

In this context, acquiring a foreign language in tandem is the most effective method in creating an authentic environment for language immersion, improving linguistic skills and developing intercultural communicative competence. The effectiveness of tandem as a method for target-language acquisition has been confirmed by many educational researchers^[8,9] and is also recognized as a tool for developing interpersonal and intercultural communication skills^[10,11]. In tandem, students practice intercultural communication^[12,13] while developing intercultural competence^[14,15]. Moreover, it positively contributes to advancing internationalization of education.^[16,17]

The method is now used in academic establishments around the world, as evidenced by numerous studies^[13,18-25]. However, in Kazakhstani universities and in particular at the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, the language tandem has not been used before.

To this end, our research team pursued the study in 3 stages. During the first one, an online survey of Kazakhstani foreign language students was conducted to understand how ready and capable they are for intercultural communication in a foreign language. During the second stage at al-Farabi Kazakh National University (KazNU) the Language Tandem website was developed to create conditions for communication with native speakers of the target language. During the third stage, a language tandem pilot project between local and foreign students was initiated at KazNU. Specifically, the article addresses the following research questions:

RQ 1. How frequently do Kazakhstani students engage in communication with native speakers and what emotions do they experience during foreign language interaction?

RQ 2. How efficient is extracurricular language tandem for enhancing intercultural communicative competence?

RQ 3. What challenges do students encounter during the extracurricular language tandem?

2. Background

The formation of intercultural communicative competence in foreign language education is given paramount importance. Having studied numerous definitions of intercultural communicative competence, we agree with Tran^[26] and understand it as “the ability which enables one to effectively and appropriately interact in a language other than one’s native language with others from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It consists of language competence (linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence) and intercultural competence attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness) that help one to be able to successfully integrate in a multicultural society.”

The founder of the term “intercultural communication” E. Hall^[6] argued that intercultural communication has an applied character, as it is the exchange of data between people from different cultures. Therefore, in order to develop intercultural communicative competence, students should be involved in intercultural communication by completing practical tasks.

The use of the tandem method in foreign language teaching offers the benefits of authentic, “culturally informed” interaction^[27], moreover, it has the potential to both develop the intercultural dimension of language learning and to motivate the language learner^[28,29].

The study of foreign languages in tandem has been used since 1986, for the first time the method was tested between students from Germany and France^[30]. Tandem learning involves two speakers of different native languages (and different cultural backgrounds) meeting using video conference calls^[20] or in-person “to help each other improve their language skills and learn about each other’s culture”^[13,31] Each of the partners alternately takes on the role of an expert in their native language, and then the role of a learner to study their partner’s language. Tandem

learning can act as an alternative or complement to traditional language classes by engaging learners in authentic interactions with peers ^[23,32–34] to exchange thoughts and negotiate meanings across cultural boundaries ^[35]. Based on this approach, students are immersed in the language environment and acquire intercultural communicative competence.

Learning language in tandem is based on two main principles. The first is mutual learning, which implies that both partners benefit from cooperation. The second principle is learner autonomy, in which, along with language acquisition, students also acquire the ability to take responsibility for their own learning process by directing, planning and assessing it, as well as collaborating with their tandem partner ^[36,37]. The tandem versatility is one of its most important advantages. Tandem classes can be extracurricular or classroom (integrated into the educational process), with or without teacher consultation, online or face-to-face, for a short or long term ^[8,38].

The tandem method can be classified in terms of space and curriculum. In terms of space, the method can be divided into personal tandem, when students meet in person, and online or electronic tandem, when students communicate through telecommunications networks. Meanwhile, in terms of curriculum, it is divided into study or institutional tandem and extracurricular tandem, where the former is fully included in the curriculum, while the latter is not ^[39].

This study focuses on extracurricular tandem. In an extracurricular tandem, autonomy means broad freedom in agreeing on levels of responsibility and reciprocity with a partner. The choice of what to do in tandem sessions is up to the partners. One of the most common and popular activities is conversation on a free topic. Tandem partners can also carry out joint projects concerning both languages, practice grammar exercises, attend cultural events like exhibitions, cook a typical meal or perform any other activity aimed at learning the target language and getting to know partner's culture. The pace of learning is also flexible and open to discussion between partners. They can meet every week, twice a week, or agree on other timeslots.

3. Method

As stated above, learning in tandem allows students representing diverse nationalities to interact effectively with each other on a regular basis. Direct and systematic contact between learners from different cultural backgrounds contributes to the acquisition of intercultural and linguistic skills.

To achieve the goals of the study, the following tasks were set:

- 1) using an anonymous survey to identify how frequently Kazakhstani students who study foreign languages have intercultural communication with native speakers and how confident they feel at the same time;
- 2) to develop a website for providing students with international contacts and creating a linguocultural and sociocultural environment for improving their intercultural communication and linguistic skills;
- 3) to establish how effective extracurricular tandem is for the formation of intercultural communicative competence;
- 4) to determine what troubles students can face during extracurricular tandem;
- 5) to assess the potency of tandem method for enhancing international cooperation.

To resolve the tasks and ensure the reliability of the study, such empirical methods as questioning, observation, experiment, as well as data processing methods, namely methods of statistical analysis, quantitative and qualitative analysis and generalization of experimental data were comprehensively used.

3.1. The Study of the Frequency of Students' Intercultural Communication

Navaitene et al. ^[40] believe that a productive way to acquire intercultural communicative competence is interaction with people from other cultures. Zhang Y. ^[41] in his study proves that the frequency of contacts with foreigners correlates with the level of competence in intercultural communication, since ICC is a growing process along with a growing intercultural experience of a person. In other words, those who communicate weekly with native

speakers are more competent in intercultural communication than those who have less or no contact at all. However, very often in traditional classes, according to Cziko ^[42], students do not have authentic communication in natural sociolinguistic settings, and also receive limited knowledge about culture and patterns of social interaction.

In this regard, the authors conducted a study to determine how frequently Kazakhstani students studying foreign languages communicate with native speakers and what emotions they experience during cross-cultural interaction. The study was conducted in the format of an online survey using a Google form. 587 students from 3 cities of Kazakhstan, specifically Almaty, Astana and Taraz, participated in the survey. In accordance with the CEFR foreign language proficiency standards, 26% of respondents had an elementary level of foreign language proficiency (A1/A2), 55% had intermediate - upper-intermediate level (B1/B2), and 19% had advanced level (C1/C2).

Based on the results of the study (Figure 1), only 11% of the survey participants (64 people) frequently collaborate with native speakers, 30% (174 students) interact from time to time, 43% (250 respondents) almost never have intercultural communication, and 17% (99 people) have never had experience of communicating with the representatives of the target language.

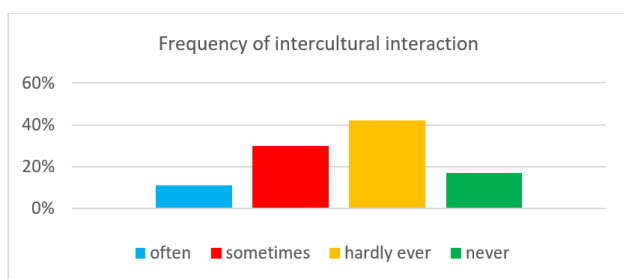


Figure 1. Frequency of intercultural interaction in target language.

According to Figure 2, when communicating in a foreign language with native speakers, 283 learners encounter a language barrier, 146 respondents experience dread and uncertainty, and only 158 respondents feel confident and relaxed. Thus, the majority of interviewees (429 people) perceive negative emotions.

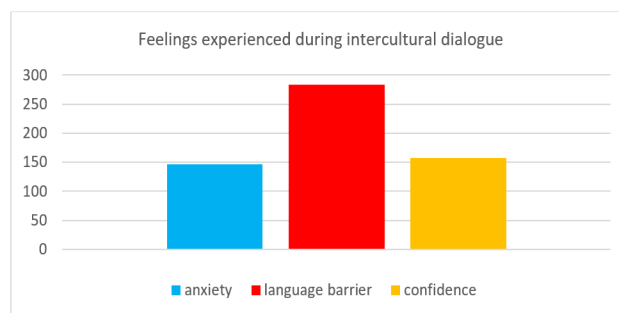


Figure 2. Feelings experienced during intercultural communication.

Figure 3 shows the reasons for the occurrence of positive or negative emotions during intercultural dialogue in a foreign language. So, the confidence occurs from the proficiency in a foreign language (100 participants) and the prior experience of interacting with native speakers (65 participants). Besides, 141 respondents express a sense of calmness regarding their mistakes, realizing that the foreign language is not their mother tongue. Anxiety and linguistic barriers are most often experienced due to the poor linguistic competence such as insufficient vocabulary (189 answers) and low level of foreign language proficiency (48); psychological factors, namely fear of being funny and silly (94) and dread of being misunderstood (75); as well as lack of experience in intercultural communication (73).

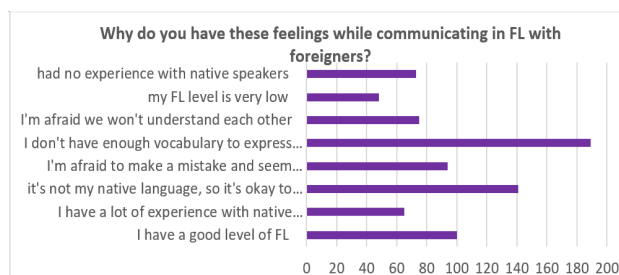


Figure 3. Reasons for positive or negative emotions when talking with foreigners.

Furthermore, according to the survey, the ability to speak and express oneself in a foreign language is the most difficult linguistic skill for 65% of respondents. Statistical analysis of the survey data revealed a significant positive correlation between the frequency of communication with native speakers and the level of language anxiety.

Students were also addressed a question with multiple answer options: “Where do you communicate with

native speakers?” **Figure 4** demonstrates that most often, 275 answers, students independently seek opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue, specifically, 170 of them establish personal international contacts by virtue of travelling, computer games, social networks, interaction with foreign students and colleagues, 105 of them attend language courses. 203 respondents interact with representatives of the target language in educational institutions, namely 127 of them in foreign language classes, 39 in lectures with foreign professors; 37 - while participating in international programs. However, 146 respondents do not have the opportunity for intercultural communication in a foreign language. As demonstrated, higher educational establishments do not fully impose conditions for the interaction of their students with native speakers of the target language.

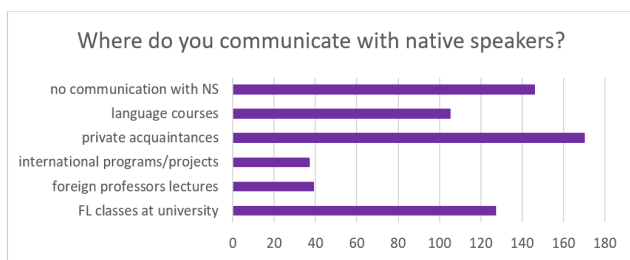


Figure 4. Conditions for intercultural communication.

The results of the study revealed the existing problem in the foreign language education of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Only 11% of the students surveyed often interact with native speakers; 73% of respondents experience a language barrier, fear, stress and panic when communicating. Students studying foreign languages are not fully prepared for intercultural communication. Therefore, institutions of higher education should provide students with international contacts and create a multicultural environment.

3.2. A Platform for Intercultural Exchange

Due to the lack of an authentic setting conducive to learning foreign languages and culture in Kazakhstan, higher education institutions must develop innovative solutions to provide such an environment for their students. After analyzing the experience of foreign universities, such as the University of Geneva, Switzerland and the University of Freiburg, Germany in creating conditions

for intercultural interaction between local and foreign students, the “Language Tandem” website was developed at the al-Farabi Kazakh National University.

This platform allows to establish direct and regular contacts between domestic and international students. Involving foreign students in communication with local students will assist them quickly adapt to a new cultural and linguistic ambience, improve their language and get to know the culture of the country. According to Almazova et al.^[43], the sociolinguistic and cultural adaptation of overseas students studying with local partners in tandem is faster. For regional students, this is a possibility to practice language with native speakers without leaving the country.

In accordance with the language policy of Kazakhstan, the website was developed in three languages: Kazakh, Russian, and English. All interested students, as well as teachers and university staff can register on the platform. Registration and use of the website is free. After registering on the website with an indication of the mother and target languages, the student automatically receives a list of all partners that match his/her criteria with an email address and a mobile phone. Further, the student independently chooses a partner for himself/herself and establishes contact with him/her. Also, students can re-register if they want to practice another foreign language.

Since the tandem method is being used for the first time at al-Farabi Kazakh National University, the website (**Picture 1**) contains general information about tandem method, effective rules and tips for working in tandem, news, as well as a forum where participants can share their opinion or ask a question. The section “Rules for working in tandem” presents the principles of language tandem, guidelines developed for both roles the learner and the expert. In addition, it outlines important points that need to be discussed at the first meeting. The tab page “Tips for working in tandem” offers recommendations for conducting classes in tandem and sample topics for discussion. Furthermore, it provides links to a website with developed thematic sheets and handouts, video and audio files. Moreover, recommendations are given for correcting errors during tandem classes.



Picture 1. Website home page.

By the end of the Extracurricular Tandem project, 121 people were registered on the website, 68 of whom were overseas students. Foreign participants are from 22 countries, such as China, Great Britain, USA, Afghanistan, Russia, Japan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, France, Nigeria, Yemen, Bangladesh, Italy, Uzbekistan, Algeria, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mongolia, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Germany.

Students and professors highly appreciated the opportunity for intercultural communication. University teachers also take an active part in the tandem, so currently one of the educators is studying Persian in tandem with a student from Afghanistan, another teacher is acquiring Turkish.

The language platform creation meets the trends of Kazakhstan in the process of internationalization at home, as well as the UNESCO recommendations to expand direct and regular contacts between students of different cultures.

3.3. The Extracurricular Tandem Project

Description of the project.

A 12-week pilot project “Extracurricular language tandem” between foreign and local students was conducted at the al-Farabi Kazakh National University for the first time. Since the project was extracurricular and not part of the students’ curriculum, students’ participation was voluntary and took place in their free time.

The objectives of the pilot project were:

1) to create a natural linguistic ambience for local and foreign students;

2) to impose conditions for enhancing the learners’ communication and linguistic skills;

3) to promote students’ intercultural communication;

4) to enhance intercultural communicative competence of students.

The tandem sessions followed the three principles of the tandem method ^[36] According to the first principle, languages should not be mixed, so the students had two one-hour lessons per week in each language separately. The second principle is reciprocity, each tandem partner in turn took the role of an expert and a student for an equal amount of time and classes. The third principle is autonomy, the students themselves made up their own schedule, the number and duration of the meetings, chose the way of conducting classes (personal meetings or online), venue, and topics for discussion.

3.3.1. Participants

The pilot project “Extracurricular Language Tandem” involved 24 students (**Table 1**), namely 12 foreign students and 12 Kazakh students aged 18 to 40. Since this project was extracurricular and completely autonomous, the students chose the language to study independently. As a result, 12 tandem dyads were formed, namely 4 Chinese-Russian tandems, 3 Arabic-Russian tandems, 3 English-Russian tandems, 1 Turkish-Russian tandem and 1 Persian-Kazakh tandem. 6 foreign students (3 guys and 1 girl from China, 2 girls from America, 1 guy from Great Britain) took a Russian language course at the Faculty of Pre-University Preparation, their Russian language level was A2-B2 in accordance with CEFR level standards. The remaining 6 foreign students, namely 3 students from Yemen, 1 from Turkey together with 1 from Afghanistan studied at the faculties of medicine, philosophy and politics, their level of Russian and Kazakh languages in obedience to CEFR level standards was A1. Tandem partners of foreign students were 12 local students (11 girls and 1 guy), studying to be translators and orientalists, their level of target languages according to CEFR was: English – B1-B2, Arabic – B1-B2, Chinese – A2, Persian – A2, Turkish – A1.

Table 1. Extracurricular tandem participants.

Tandem Number	Nationality	Gender	Target Language in Tandem	Language Level (CEFR)	Number of Meetings	Meeting Format
T1	USA	Female	Russian	B1	20	personal
	Kazakhstan	Female	English	B1		
T2	USA	Female	Russian	B2	20	personal
	Kazakhstan	Female	English	B2		
T3	Great Britain	Male	Russian	A2	20	personal
	Kazakhstan	Female	English	B1		
T4	China	Male	Russian	A2	17	online
	Kazakhstan	Female	Chinese	A2		
T5	China	Male	Russian	A2	14	online
	Kazakhstan	Female	Chinese	A2		
T6	China	Female	Russian	B1	20	online
	Kazakhstan	Female	Chinese	A2		
T7	China	Male	Russian	B1	20	online
	Kazakhstan	Female	Chinese	A2		
T8	Yemen	Male	Russian	A1	11	online
	Kazakhstan	Female	Arabic	B1		
T9	Yemen	Male	Russian	A1	16	online
	Kazakhstan	Female	Arabic	B2		
T10	Yemen	Male	Russian	A1	10	online
	Kazakhstan	Female	Arabic	B2		
T11	Turkey	Male	Russian	A1	20	online
	Kazakhstan	Female	Turkish	A1		
T12	Afghanistan	Male	Kazakh	A1	16	personal
	Kazakhstan	Male	Persian	A2		

3.3.2.Data Collection

The extracurricular language tandem experiment was conducted over 12 weeks in March-May 2023. The first week was an introductory one, during which two organizational meetings were held online and a pre-experimental survey was conducted. From the 2nd to the 11th week, students had language practice in tandem. In the 12th week a final meeting was held. As well students filled out a feedback questionnaire to assess their experience and opinions on the tandem method. The study was conducted using a questionnaire containing closed and open-ended questions.

A comprehensive analysis of the questionnaire data, including quantitative and qualitative methods, allowed for an in-depth study of the participants' experience of tandem learning and its effectiveness. Descriptive statistics methods were used for the quantitative analysis of the data obtained on a 5-point Likert scale. In particular, mean values and percentages were calculated, which allowed

for identifying the most common assessments of the participants regarding their experience in a language tandem. Moreover, thematic analysis was used to systematize and interpret open-ended responses, identifying key themes reflecting the experience of the tandem participants.

4. Findings

Since the project was extracurricular, the students arranged their own schedule and decided on the meetings format, that is online or face-to-face. In this way, Persian-Kazakh (T12) and 3 English-Russian (T1, T2, T3) dyads organized personal meetings in the classrooms and the library of the university, the remaining 8 dyads preferred online classes using WhatsApp and Zoom. On average, tandem-partners held 10–20 meetings according to the schedule. Moreover, besides the scheduled appointments, they additionally maintained active correspondence

in WhatsApp. Weekly students encountered twice for an hour, one meeting was held in one language, the second in another.

During the orientation week, tandem partners were offered topics to study. However, they had the opportunity to independently come up with topics for discussion and prepare material depending on their preferences, interests and goals. Thus, the entire responsibility for organizing and conducting classes was assigned on the students. Nevertheless, the project organizers were in constant contact with the students and assisted to cope with emerging issues and concerns, for instance, helping to organize venue for classes. Furthermore, students had access to the “Language Tandem” website, which contained recommendations for conducting tandem classes, links to a website with developed thematic sheets, audio and video materials, explanations for correcting errors during tandem training as well.

A total of 16 people (66% of all project participants) took part in the feedback survey, 5 of whom dropped out of the tandem classes anticipatorily. A five-point Likert scale (**Figure 5**) was used to assess 1) how much the students enjoyed the extracurricular language tandem, 2) whether their awareness of the target culture increased, and 3) whether their language skills improved. According to the results of the answers to Question 1, a significant portion of respondents (75%) positively assessed the language learning in tandem by choosing 5 points, while an equal number of students, 12.5% each, rated this method at 4 and 3. Question 2, regarding experiencing a new culture, showed that half of the respondents rated the method at 4, at the same time 37.5% graded 5 points, and a smaller group of 12.5% ranked it at 3 points. The responses to the Question 3 indicate that the majority of respondents (62.5%) perceived good (4 points) improvement in their linguistic skills, 25% distinguished excellent upgrade, and 12.5% observed satisfactory improvement.

Furthermore, the mean values of the data presented in **Figure 5** were computed (**Table 2**). Overall, the mean values of each question range from 4.12 to 4.62, indicating high interest of students in language exchange with a native speaker, as well as a positive effect on improving the skills necessary for the formation of ICC.

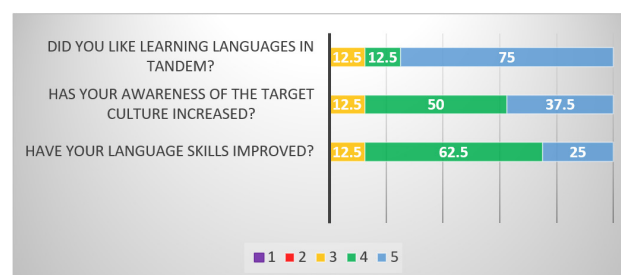


Figure 5. Students' assessment of tandem learning, language skills, and cultural awareness after the project.

Table 2. Average value of the indicators from Figure 5.

№	Feedback Question	Mean Value
1	Did you like learning languages in tandem?	4.62
2	Has your awareness of the target culture increased?	4.25
3	Have your language skills improved?	4.12

Additionally, tandem participants mentioned the following advantages of tandem method in open-ended Question 4: improving spoken language, gaining confidence in communicating in a foreign language; lack of evaluation by teachers; overcoming the fear of making mistakes; good pronunciation practice; expanding social skills; acquaintance with culture, authentic customs and traditions. Students noted:

“Enhancing spoken language and sharing culture.”

“You become more confident in speaking.”

“Classes are informal so you can practice the language without fear or awkwardness.”

“I like the language tandem because you improve your foreign language, you won’t forget the language you’ve learned, also you meet new people.”

“I think it is a good method, because it is a nice way of talking with your peers and practicing a more informal style of speech. I liked that I could hear native speech and practice my pronunciation. However, it is difficult to meet once or twice a week, especially considering that we have different schedules and that we have classes often. For example, I have class 6 days a week, for 3-5 hours a day; this makes it difficult to schedule things.

The above comments highlight the potential impact of interaction with native speakers in an informal setting on learners’ intercultural and communicative competences and reduction of language anxiety. It is worth noting that students emphasize the informality of communication.

This allows them to perceive more comfortable and confident.

However, the project participants also encountered some challenges, which were indicated in open question 5 and can be divided into 2 groups. The first is related to technical and organizational issues. The main complexity for all project participants was scheduling classes. Students noted:

“[...] timetable conflicts [...]”

“Partners choose the time themselves, and the tandem is not included in our classes, so it is difficult to find a common time (different schedules)”.

“[...] make a schedule and find a suitable place [...]”

Different academic workload may cause difficulties in creating a convenient schedule for both, as well as in choosing a meeting place.

Some tandem partners who studied online had various difficulties with the technique and organization of the online lessons, as can be seen from the student's report:

“[...] yes, we had dating lessons, but she had problems with WhatsApp, she couldn't log in, so we didn't meet that week. Our next lesson will be tomorrow.”

This problem points to the need to offer tandem participants a list of possible video communication programs, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams.

These findings indicate the importance of organizing a special room at the university - a “tandem club”, equipped with computers and a stable Internet connection. This will allow language partners to take advantage of the relaxed atmosphere for communication or access to additional materials at any time convenient for them.

The second group includes difficulties corresponding to the relationship with the language partner. So, in the Arabic-Russian (T16) tandem, we had to change one of the tandem partners, as they were unable to reach mutual understanding.:

“[...] I probably won't be able to work with this partner. He talks too fast; he won't be able to get into my position. It seems to me that he speaks with pride, so I can't... I don't want to practice with him anymore. I would like to try with others.”

From the student's message, it is clear that he was interested in tandem learning and wanted to continue his

language practice, but with another partner.

Furthermore, some partners of Arabic-Russian (T8) and one of the English-Russian (T2) tandems canceled classes at the last moment or did not contact their partners at all on the agreed schedule. Some students claimed:

“[...] reliability of partner...he quit or cancelled meetings.”

“[...] Sometimes partner makes absent.”

Another unexpected issue that deserves attention was the formation of dyads. Most of the tandem partners in the project were of the opposite sex (Table 1), and some students felt uncomfortable. So, in the Chinese-Russian (T4) tandem, one of the students was married and asked for a same-sex partner. Some students (T4 and T10) reflected:

“[...] I'm already married, so talking to girls alone is not appropriate. My wife doesn't mind, but I still need to be careful. Are there men among my tandem participants?”

“Are there any female participants? Will it be possible to connect me preferably with girls?”

This issue can be addressed by allowing students to choose their tandem-partners independently or by indicating their gender preference for a partner on the registration form. Our website is designed in such a way that upon registration, students are presented with a list of all eligible candidates with the option to select a partner based on their preference.

Problems related to the tandem relationship indicate the need for additional support from the tandem coordinators. If there is misunderstanding or non-fulfillment of obligations on the part of the tandem partner, the tandem coordinator offers simple strategies for overcoming obstacles. If no improvement occurs, the tandem coordinator attempts to find a new partner for the motivated student.

Additionally, an open-ended Question 6 regarding the reasons for the early termination of tandem classes was addressed to 5 students who withdrew from the project but agreed to take the survey. The results demonstrated that the reason was their “excessive workload”, “start of exams”. In this regard, according to student's response below, the participants preferred to focus on their main classes and exams.

“Most of the problems we had were because of our university responsibilities - which makes sense, because

that is our most important responsibility. I think the fact that it was during exam period was a factor, because it was hard to coordinate.”

Due to bureaucratic delays, the pilot project started in the middle of the 2nd semester, in the midst of midterm assessments, exam preparation and a long holiday weekend. Also, local students, in addition to academic workload and tandem classes, also combined part-time work.

The feedback findings revealed a number of complexities that the project participants encountered during tandem learning, such as difficulties in scheduling meetings, technical failures, misunderstandings between partners, and lack of time. However, as one student (T1) noted, “language practice in tandem has more advantages than disadvantages.”

5. Discussion

The outcomes of the survey indicate that when studying a language in conditions of artificial bilingualism and without interaction with native speakers of the target language, students are unable to spontaneously and without significant difficulties engage in dialogue in a foreign language. Specifically, learners cannot apply a target language as a communicative means outside the usual classroom conditions^[44].

To address this challenge, the research group attempted to create a natural language environment for students and enlarge their international cooperation by developing the Language Tandem website. The designed platform has attracted much attention, as evidenced by the registration of 121 participants in a short time, 56% of whom are foreign students. Registration on the Language Tandem platform allowed students and teaching staff to experience regular linguistic and cultural exchanges with native speakers of the target language for free and without leaving home. The first students registered on the website took part in the Extracurricular Language Tandem pilot project.

The pilot project demonstrated that the tandem method is a great way for a higher education institutions and teachers of foreign languages to create a linguocultural and sociocultural ambience for their learners. As noted by

Marsh-Soloway and Delers, tandem learning effectively allies with students in different parts of the world, offering them the possibility to establish relationships and engage in global dialogue in the face of stark material inequalities^[45] Tandem contributes to the emergence of confidence in speaking a foreign language and the reduction of language anxiety^[24] and enjoyment of personal interaction with a native speaker and access to informal everyday target language^[46] Students, both foreign and local, demonstrated great interest in cross-cultural dialogue, improved their social skills and gained appreciable experience from interacting with native speakers and representatives of other cultures. Some tandem partners maintained amicable relations and intended to resume studying after the project.

“In the future, if possible, I would continue my tandem classes with this partner.”

“I like to work with my partner and I want to keep in touch with her after exams.”

A tandem of language and cultural exchange is a powerful tool for the development of intercultural communicative competence, since when communicating with native speakers, language (linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse) and sociocultural competences are formed. Linguistic competence is enhanced by practicing all language skills, improving fluency and pronunciation, expanding vocabulary and idioms, polishing grammatical structures as well. Discursive competence is formed when tandem partners acquire skills in perceiving various accents and logical structuring of speech in the target language for the purpose of meaningful communication. In addition, in tandem, learners become competent in applying and interpreting linguistic forms depending on the situation, thereby developing sociolinguistic competence. Moreover, learners deepen their knowledge about the target country, its culture, customs and traditions, which is the formation of intercultural competence. One of the students noted:

“...Learning foreign languages in tandem seems to me very effective, since it is possible to interact with a native speaker, adopt the correct pronunciation and accent, learn actual expressions and idioms. Of course, difficulties can arise, such as choosing a time and place for classes, as well as sometimes not understanding what language to speak in our free time. I learned a lot about the language I

studied, and in general, I gained useful experience.”

As can be observed, learning foreign languages in an extracurricular tandem is much more complicated for students than in an institutional tandem. First, students require to organize self-learning by establishing a relationship with a partner, discussing learning goals, schedule and place of meetings. As the study showed, tandem partners did not experience difficulties in building relationships, one of the participants recorded: “we often communicated and corresponded on various topics not related to tandem lessons.” The most problematic for them was planning schedules. Moreover, at this stage, learners face a dilemma with choosing a language to solve organizational issues, whether it will be a lingua franca or one of the tandem languages. As mentioned, it is fostering learner autonomy [46, 47]. As a result, during extracurricular tandem classes, such learning and innovation skills as critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration are formed.

Secondly, in an extracurricular tandem, students must devote a significant amount of time to preparing for meetings, namely planning the topics of classes, selecting appropriate educational material. A student of the Russian-English tandem (T3) indicated that “it took about half an hour to an hour to prepare for the classes, it was interesting to look for the material in order to share it with my partner later.” It is particularly laborious to organize self-learning of a foreign language if the level of the target language is beginner (A1), since such tandems are energy-consuming for both partners. One of the partners acts more as a teacher rather than a language expert, which demands a lot of patience and pedagogical skill from him. So, partner from the American-Russian tandem (T2) shared her vision of the language proficiency criteria for participation in the tandem:

“I think that this method should not be used as a way to have the other person “teach” you the native language; rather, it should be about learning how to talk casually. So, this method is suitable for those with an intermediate or above level.”

The least number of meetings was carried out by dyads T8, T9, T10, T12 (Table 1), in which one of the tandem partners had a beginner level of the target language

(A1). Ryan ^[48] noted that the absence of a curriculum and differences in learners’ competency levels, interests and goals could pose challenges for them in directing learning process and measuring language acquisition. Nevertheless, the Turkish-Russian tandem (T11) held the maximum number of meetings, despite the fact that both partners were beginners in the target language (A1). These students used English as a support language to achieve mutual understanding in organizing and conducting classes and started by learning the alphabet using a self-instruction manual. From our perspective, for productive independent learning in extracurricular tandem students should have at least a pre-intermediate level of foreign language proficiency (A2). For students with level A1, it is advisable to study with a teacher, and use extracurricular tandem to improve the knowledge gained.

Thirdly, extracurricular tandem is not included in the curriculum. It is an additional academic load that is not evaluated or controlled by teachers, so students must have high intrinsic motivation and dedication to achieving the set learning goals. Bo Gyeong Son et al. ^[25] claimed that some students prefer independent work and do not want constant control from the teacher, while others need regular support and assessment of their achievements. Moreover, some students are unwilling to make an effort for improving their skills if they do not get grades for it. Thereby, only 6 dyads participating in the project had sustained dedication and willpower to cope with all the difficulties and conduct the maximum number of classes.

Based on the above, the complete autonomy of the extracurricular tandem contributes to the formation, in addition to the ICC, of 5 of the 8 key competences for lifelong learning proposed by the Council of The European Union ^[49]. Namely, multilingual competence (the ability to use different languages appropriately and effectively for communication); digital competence (confident use of digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society including communication and collaboration, problem solving and critical thinking); personal, social and learning to learn competence (the ability to effectively manage time and information, work with others in a constructive way, remain resilient and manage one’s own learning and career, cope with uncertainty and

complexity[50, 51, 52], learn to learn); entrepreneurial competence (founded upon creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, taking initiative and perseverance and the ability to work collaboratively in order to plan and manage projects)^[53,54]; cultural awareness and expression competence (an understanding of and respect for how ideas and meaning are creatively expressed and communicated in different cultures and through a range of arts and other cultural forms).

6. Conclusions

This study identified the problem of higher language education in Kazakhstan, which consists of a discrepancy between the requirements for sufficient linguistic and intercultural competences of students and the conditions created in educational establishments for the acquisition and development of such competencies. The research findings display that the lack or deficiency of authentic communication while studying foreign languages leads to fear of speaking a foreign language as well as inability to effectively interact with native speakers.

In the age of advanced technology and academic mobility, this challenge is completely solvable. Data show that in the context of Kazakhstan, this problem can be solved by involving local and foreign students in a tandem of linguistic and intercultural exchange. Although this study exceptionally focused on extracurricular tandem, the essential potential of this method for developing intercultural communicative competence was identified. In addition to acquiring competencies in intercultural communication, the advantages of an extracurricular tandem are regular language practice with native speakers in an informal setting without teacher evaluation; language and cultural immersion; overcoming the language barrier; developing the ability of self-learning and effective time planning; accomplishing organizational, communication and social skills; evolving willpower and self-discipline.

However, to procure the successful implementation and sustainability of an extracurricular language tandem, it is also necessary to take into account the difficulties that students may encounter. In particular, creating a schedule that is convenient for both partners; organization of classes

and preparation for them; problems with technology and available classrooms; irresponsibility and non-punctuality of tandem partners; initial level of the target language; lack of intrinsic motivation and determination. Moreover, this study was conducted at a leading Kazakhstani university, which has many international students; in regional universities there is a problem with the absence of foreign students.

For this reason, it is essential to fill current gap by providing regional students with opportunities to interact with representatives of the target language. Future research will be aimed at increasing participants in the Language Tandem website, by providing access to all Kazakhstani and overseas students, as well as implementing a collective tandem with Kazakhstani and foreign educational institutions.

Author Contributions

All authors were involved in concept, design, collection of data, interpretation, writing, and critically revising the article. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Ethic Declaration

The authors declared that the study does not require ethics committee approval since the data were obtained via online platforms that do not collect and store identifiable information. The participation was on a voluntary basis. Informed consents were obtained from the participants.

Anonymity of the personal data have been protected.

Data Availability Statement

The authors confirm that all data generated and analyzed in this study are included in this paper.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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