

Cross-border Tandem Cooperation at the Tertiary Level: Its Outputs and Their Educational Potential

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ABSTRACT:

The presented research claims that cross-border tandem projects can be exploited in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as a powerful tool to develop foreign language proficiency, 21st century skills, and professional expertise. An international tandem project was conducted between two HEIs — the Czech ŠKODA AUTO University and the Austrian University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria. Each student pair undertook a research project on a mutually agreed topic in English and presented it through an abstract, academic poster, and video presentation. The tandem project cooperation is discussed from the students' perspective using a thematic analysis of critical incidents shared through focus groups, interviews, and student written accounts.

Attention was paid to how students handled time management, problem solving, responsibility sharing, how they saw their learning and personal development, as well as how their teachers managed the project to propose a tandem-project pedagogical approach for educators. It was found that, despite initial uncertainties and problems, the experience enhanced the students' English language proficiency, expanded their intercultural knowledge and expertise, developed 21st century skills, and promoted international networking.

ABSTRAKT:

Studie popisuje možnosti tandemové spolupráce na úrovni terciálního vzdělávání pro rozvoj jazykových, komunikačních a profesních dovedností. Projekt mezinárodní spolupráce dvojic proběhl mezi partnerskými institucemi z České republiky (ŠKODA AUTO Vysoká škola) a Rakouska (University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria). Každý tandem zpracoval společné téma, jehož výstupem byl akademický plakát, abstrakt a závěrečná videoprezentace. Text popisuje proces projektu z pohledu studentů a jejich zkušeností. Pro účely sběru dat studenti sdíleli písemné a ústní narativy ve formě kritických incidentů, které byly následně analyzovány prostřednictvím tematické analýzy.

Analýza výpovědí se soustředí na zvládnání spolupráce po stránce plánování, řešení problémů, dělby rolí a zodpovědnosti. Navzdory potížím, kterým studenti čelili z počátku i v průběhu projektu, je kladně hodnocen jejich osobnostní a profesní rozvoj, včetně rozvoje klíčových dovedností 21. století, zlepšení úrovně angličtiny a navazování mezinárodních kontaktů. Výstupem textu je návrh pedagogického přístupu pro řízení tandemové spolupráce pro pedagogy.

KEY WORDS:

tandem project, 21st century skills, teaching methodology, critical incidents, cross-border cooperation

1 THE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

With increasing international cooperation among enterprises, deeper intercultural awareness has become a major driver for labor market developments, especially in

cross-border regions. Consequently, HEIs have to prepare future graduates for global citizenship and cultural literacy. Apart from tuition in subject areas, they have to keep a critical eye on employability (Gaisch et al., 2020; Sieglöva & Pribramska, 2021; Sieglöva & Stejskalova, 2021).

A shift toward more people-oriented jobs due to the continued development of artificial intelligence, automation, and digitalization has been predicted. These processes are expected to endanger 14% or substantially reshape up to 32% of jobs on a global scale (OECD, 2019, p. 3). People-oriented jobs, such as free-time activities, life-long learning, beauty, and personal, health or psychological care, should weather the changes (Council of Europe, 2014; Schwab, 2018; OECD, 2019, p. 14). A necessary richer skill base will, therefore, go beyond professional expertise and embrace trans-cultural communication, intercultural competencies, and conflict and change management, for example. What is more, the Covid-19 pandemic together with the conflict in Ukraine only accelerated this trend. To accommodate this new social reality, courses must innovate both their curricula and their teaching practices (Gaisch, 2014; Sieglöva & Pribramska, 2021; Sieglöva & Stejskalova, 2021).

The need for suitable change in educational institutions has already been worked into the international educational strategies of, for example, the OECD (2019), Council of Europe (2014), International Monetary Fund (2018) or World Bank (2018). Known as reskilling (requalification or retraining for a different job) or upskilling (learning new skills to optimize a person's performance), they are key pillars to develop sustainable human capital for the future in the world of work. The global institutions set up a base for the respective national educational strategies and plans, including both Austria and Czechia.

National educational strategy documents, such as the White Papers for Education (MŠMT ČR, 2001; Chládek, 2015) and the General and School Educational Programs in Czechia (NÚV, 2004), or the STEM Education and the Skills in the Labour Market in Austria (Binder et al., 2017; Schrack, 2018), all determine a set of skills, capabilities and knowledge viewed as “prerequisites for success in the global workplace of the future” (Germaine et al., 2016, p. 9) in an ever-changing society (O'Brien, 2020). These documents define, first, the so-called STEM skills (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) as major skills for driving the technology-based society; second, language skills as fundamental in the world of global business cooperation; and third the so-called 21st century skills, covering skills essential for a sustainable international dialogue. The latter include the wider set of soft, intra- and interpersonal skills, such as the ability to adopt communication, teamwork, critical thinking, or problem-solving skills, as well as personal responsibility, judgement, integrity, ethical or moral standards.

The above-mentioned strategies can already be seen in most of the European HEIs specializations, language programs, and internationalization efforts. The 21st century skills, to enhance future employability of their graduates, can be gained through foreign languages, projects, coursework or internships. However, this context demands innovative approaches. With this in mind, the paper analyses the project's cross-border cooperation, its outputs, and their educational potential from the perspective of students, based on the hypothesis that, as direct participants, students can contribute with valuable reflections to attain efficiency in tandem project management practices.

2 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Underpinning tandem cooperation or language learning by exchange is the social nature of humans and the learning potential of cooperation. It recognizes the importance of social engagement among the young as future leaders, innovators, and policy makers.

2.1 COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Learning is socially constructed. People gain experience and knowledge, develop interpersonal, communication and intercultural skills, and test them in practice through interaction and cooperation. Cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Steele, 2001; Johnson et al., 2014) draws upon natural social interaction, building knowledge and competences for life and working practice. Groupings varied in size draw upon cooperation, competition and individual aspirations to pursue common goals and improve chances of success. Cooperative learning fosters active engagement and a student-centered approach, engendering learner motivation and autonomy (Robertson, 2013; Little et al., 2017), advanced cognitive functions through its dynamism and complexity (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 2009), critical thinking (Steele, 2001; Quines, 2017), and sustainable retention of knowledge and skills. The cross-border tandem cooperation demonstrated these outcomes to different extents.

2.2 TANDEM TEACHING AND LEARNING

Student tandem cooperation dates back to Germany in the 1960s, gradually expanding to the whole world (Wolff, 1991; Brammerts & Clavert, 2003; Vassalo & Telles, 2006). Tandem projects were first adopted by language schools and later integrated into high schools and universities to boost students' foreign language development. In its original form, tandem learning was a two-way process of direct communication between two learners, usually native speakers in two different languages, who wanted to learn each other's tongue, taking turns to use each language. Tandem cooperation can adopt flexible forms varying in team size, time intensity or subject. In pairs, students acquire CEFR delineated basic language skills (Council of Europe, 2011) and gain cultural understanding, sensitivity, awareness, competence, and knowledge (Campellini, 2016). Tandem projects, therefore, allow for a wider application in professional fields and subjects, helping students develop skills and competences crucial to modern reality. Reciprocal guidance substituting the teacher's role represents the core of cooperative learning fostering student motivation and learning autonomy.

2.3 ACADEMIC POSTERS

Originally used in marketing and advertising (Le Coultré & Purvis, 2002), posters have later gained a wide use in politics, art, or architecture. In academia, they are known as academic posters used to present research findings at conferences in

a reader-friendly way. In HEIs, posters cultivate students' academic and professional skills such as managing resources, data collection and analysis, structuring academic texts and giving presentations. They can be flexibly used in varied professional subjects and are an ideal tool for integrating the Content and Language Integrated Learning approach (CLIL) (Marsh, 1994; Morgado et al., 2015) to teaching foreign languages in professional contexts. This paper postulates that in this form, the students not only develop their foreign language, intercultural communication and cooperation skills, but also improve their academic and professional literacy.

3 METHODOLOGY

The tandem cooperation was part of an international Erasmus+ project entitled 'Critical Incidents in Intercultural Communication and Promoting Diversity' (CIICPD) run between 2020–2022 among five project partner countries: Czechia, Germany, Finland, Austria, and Italy. The aim of the project is to pursue the teaching and learning potential of critical incidents and to elaborate on them with possible interpretations and further reflection upon the students' train of thought. In the given case, the tandems were set up between the Czech and Austrian partner institutions.

3.1 ŠKODA AUTO UNIVERSITY (SAU)

Founded in 2000, The SAU is a private university located in Mladá Boleslav, Czechia, offering bachelor's and master's degree programs in Czech or English specializing in economic, management and business administration. SAU incorporates mandatory internships into its degree program. Whether abroad or with a company engaged in international business, such internships demand a high level of foreign language competence from its students. The tandem project was part of the Language and Intercultural Communication Department master's degree business English program (C1 level). The group included 24 students (10 males and 14 females) ranging between 22–25 years in age — 21 Czech, 1 Japanese, 1 Russian and 1 Kazakhstani. All have completed their bachelor's degree internship and some continued their employment part-time.

3.2 UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES UPPER AUSTRIA (FH UPPER AUSTRIA)

FH Upper Austria was founded in 1994 with campuses in four cities: Linz, Wels, Steyr, and Hagenberg. It is the most research intense university of applied sciences in the German-speaking world with 16 specialist areas linked to individual faculties. The university has 29 part-time programs predominantly offered for students with a work commitment. The typical student is between 25–40 years old with extensive work experience. The tandem project was run in the part-time master's degree program Information Security and Management (ISM) in Hagenberg. The cohort consisted of 18 part-time students (13 males and 5 females) working in the IT industry in an international setting for at least five years. In the second semester, the students

must complete a Cambridge language certificate preparation course (C1 level) and an intercultural competence course. This combination was particularly fruitful for the tandem project as it provided students with linguistic skills and allowed them to cooperate interculturally and reflect on the cross-border experiences.

3.3 SETTING UP THE TANDEMIS

On the Austrian side, 18 students started to bond with their cross-border colleagues and form pairs to conduct a comparative study in line with the topics proposed by the 24 students from the SAU. If no agreement was found on the topic suggestions, the students needed to negotiate another topic. The remaining six students on the Czech side were then paired into a Czech–Russian, Czech–Kazakhstanian and a Czech–Japanese pair. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, the semester was run online.

As the Czech semester started four weeks before the Austrian one and ended six weeks earlier, the project was realized during the 10-week overlap. A table of names with contacts, hobbies, and three topic suggestions was initiated and prepared on the Czech side and shared with the Austrian students one week prior to their semester's commencement. Two weeks were given for the Austrian students to choose, contact, and agree on cooperation with their Czech counterparts with their teacher advisors facilitating communication issues and helping to pair the remaining individuals.

3.4 SELECTING TOPICS

In line with the two courses, the students selected topics currently discussed in the public, professional, or expert sphere comparing social realities, public opinions, and expert facts between their countries (Sieglova, 2021). The most frequently chosen topics addressed health and life styles (e.g., recycling habits of students, single-use plastic ban, security awareness in IT, food overproduction, work-life balance, gun ownership), followed by environmental topics (e.g., impacts of the Fukushima disaster, climate change on water resources), COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., impacts on cycling, sport events, gaming/movie/streaming industry, education), car industry (e.g., electric/hydrogen cars, hybrid engines, convertible cars), and business or economic topics (e.g., Nord-stream 2, cryptocurrencies, diversity management, crowdfunding).

3.5 COLLECTING DATA

Data collection largely involved critical incidents (CIs) — brief oral or written accounts of life situations that “deviate significantly, either positively or negatively, from what is normal or expected” (Edvardsson, 1992, p. 1), carry a “high emotional content” generating intense feelings ranging from confusion, annoyance, anger, to surprise, delight or satisfaction “both at the time and during its subsequent reflective interpretation” (Cope & Watts, 2000, p. 114). Thus, they are highly remarkable, revelatory, or otherwise meaningful and vividly recalled.

CIs in the form of anecdotal narratives were originally used as behavioral data to address practical problems in job related procedures (Flanagan, 1954). Critical

Incident Technique (CIT) was soon developed as a qualitative research method helping to increase “awareness and understanding of human attitudes, expectations, behaviors, and interactions” (Apedaile & Schill, 2008, p. 7) or “uncover existing realities or truths so they could be measured, predicted, and ultimately controlled” (Butterfield et al., 2005, p. 482) in the area of medicine, psychology or business studies (Flanagan, 1954; FitzGerald et al., 2007; Apedaile & Schill, 2008). Later, the CIT was adopted to collect a wide range of reflective interpretations of meanings generally built on the narrator’s experience in further disciplines, including education or intercultural studies.

In this research, CIs reveal the potential of the international tandem cooperation for learning and teaching practice from the students’ perspective. All participants shared two written accounts reflecting on their joint project work. In addition, on the Czech side, CIs were also gathered through online class discussions and focus groups, recorded and transcribed for the purpose of analysis. The Austrian students, in addition, related their CIs to the theoretical foundation set out during the lessons in a narrative mode of thought through which they tried to make sense of the cultural experience. The Czech students, on the other hand, could base their contributions on a course discussing a wide range of social topics in a broad economic context, which opened a rich selection of topic possibilities for comparative research.

Patterns were subsequently sought in the oral and written data using thematic analysis (Tuckett, 2005; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Introduced in the 1970s around the time of qualitative methodology and the constructivist approach in education, thematic analysis has been less detailed in transcript than discourse, conversation, or narrative analysis, but more easily applicable “across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6), allowing for a more flexible analysis and interpretation of certain aspects of the data. Emerging themes in data were coded and organized into meaningful categories adumbrated below, discussed, and accompanied by related vignettes drawn from the critical incidents. For the sake of authenticity of the students’ thoughts, their formulations are left in their original form as written or recounted, including grammatical or syntactic inaccuracies. Obvious spelling mistakes not impeding the meaning of the quote were corrected.

4 DATA ANALYSIS: IDENTIFYING THE THEMES

The data reveal several themes, which are discussed in the following categories: 1/ work procedures, 2/ success factors, and 3/ personal growth with a series of emerging sub-themes. In relation to the work procedures (1), students report initial uncertainties, diverse communication issues, school program differences, and disparate working habits; among the success factors (2), the students mention soft skills and varied coping strategies; and within the personal growth theme (3), students reflect on their strengths, weaknesses, and learning.

4.1 WORK PROCEDURES

The themes related to work procedures, as the data indicate, predominantly include varied aspects of the tandem cooperation that the students considered as challenging or problematic. Individual thematic categories of these remarks permeate the whole data set with some slight differences by countries. For example, while both groups mentioned communication issues, the Czech students tended to be more concerned with meeting the project requirements. The Austrian students, on the other hand, reported more frequently on time demands or differing sets of expectations. The following text will discuss the most frequently mentioned issues in an abridged way while presenting samples of individual testimonies from both sides.

4.1.1 INITIAL UNCERTAINTIES

As many of the students reported that the project was their first international cooperation experience, some students admitted general concerns or feelings of stress in the initial stages (Table 1) when the cooperation procedures were set up and negotiated. Some students pointed out experiencing a certain degree of apprehension over not knowing their allocated partners, facing new project procedures or being afraid of communication.

“I had to overcome the initial nervousness and worries. I don’t like working with someone I don’t know, waiting for our partners, not sure if they have exactly the same task, finding the platform that would allow us to share our screens and communicate effectively” CZ

“In the beginning I wrote Johanna the first email, but she did not respond for weeks. I did not know if I have a partner or not. But after that is showed that she just read my email badly. But I was scared and suspicious although I had no reason to be.” CZ

“I was not sure what to expect and given my time constraints and high workload, I was really worried that this would exceed by far the time that I have scheduled for these lessons.” AT

TABLE 1: Initial uncertainties.

Meeting the project requirements (Table 2) was another concern reported in the narratives. Some of the remarks related to uncertainties about students’ general aptitudes. Some referred to their academic skills, including in-depth literature review, precise data collection, relevant analysis as well as professional presentation of data.

“When I finished the poster and found that I was missing an analysis, but it didn’t fit anywhere. I had to think what to do, because I liked the poster the way it was. It was a little stressful for me.” CZ

“It was difficult for me collect only very important information. And create academic poster with all the essentials.” CZ

“It was not clearly outlined which methods to choose; apparently, the Czech and Austrian teachers had different expectations and we were confused.” AT

TABLE 2: Project requirements.

4.1.2 COMMUNICATION

Communication issues, in fact, most frequently appeared throughout the whole data set (Table 3). As the project first took place online, the students missed an opportunity to meet face-to-face and facilitate potential issues. For example, due to their schools' different online systems, the students encountered frequent technical difficulties when initially setting up communication channels, including finding a compatible platform for sharing documents.

"It was hard to find an application to share the screen. In Teams we can't create a meeting from two universities. After that we found Zoom. Neither of us didn't know how to work Zoom but I learned about it from my colleague." CZ

"We had numerous communication issues, the MS Teams channel did not work, and we even had different time zones despite being both part of MET." AT

"We had issues getting connected via MS Teams. We are so used to it and it would be a shame not seeing each other." AT

TABLE 3: Technical difficulties.

Other various communication issues continued throughout the project. With no opportunity to travel between the two countries, delays (Table 4) between sending a message and receiving an answer, frequently described as "waiting for feedback", became hard to cope with for many of the students. In addition, the expected intensity of contact differed significantly. Missing the "face-to-face contact" was mentioned on several occasions in this context, too.

"When we had almost all parts of the poster ready and just lacked the graphs, I sent the results of the survey and waited. But he didn't write for a long time and I was afraid I was without a poster. The graphic page was in charge of an Austrian student, so I could only wait. In the end, he apologized for late reaction but at that moment I was scared." CZ

"After our third meeting, I finished my work on the research results and sent them to Johanna to design the poster. She was not responding for more than a week. I wrote her several emails and via messenger where I asked if she needs any help, but she was not responding. It was a difficult situation because I was afraid if she would do her work... Johanna then responded and apologized because she had a lot of work." CZ

"At that time, I had a very tight schedule and did not get back immediately on the Czech response. It was strange to see that they immediately involved the teacher instead of trying to get hold of me a second time." AT

TABLE 4: Communication delays.

Another challenge the pairs faced was agreeing on a mutual topic (Table 5). Even though the Austrian students chose a Czech partner from a list of three suggested topics complemented by a portfolio of individual hobbies, a perfect fit was not easy. Therefore, a varied degree of satisfaction with the topic and some interesting strategies toward an agreement could be traced in the data. Few of the pairs report they

found a mutual topic easily. Some had to make compromises. One student, on the other hand, withdrew from the cooperation refusing to make compromises.

“There was interesting debate about our topic’s suggestion and little struggle. However, we combined two topics which we were interested in into one.” CZ

“With my partner, we have some troubles at the very beginning, while we were trying to agree on topic for our project. And when we managed to identify the topic, it was hard to agree on the form of our poster — what it should include, how wide the topic should be... Fortunately, we managed to agree on all.” CZ

“At the beginning, it was said we can choose a topic in line with our interest, but then the Czech student told me that I had to choose a business-related topic, which I did not like. This was frustrating for me.” AT

“We both had some hidden assumptions on why the other person choose the given topic and what their opinion may be on the matter at hand.” AT

TABLE 5: Negotiating topics.

A few students also mentioned language barriers and related misunderstandings due to varied language competence levels (Table 6). Some even compared their language proficiencies with their counterpart observing either a language deficiency or advantage. Misunderstanding mainly related to different interpretations of topic suggestions, reasons for absence of communication or each other’s study situation, including work or family commitments.

“In the beginning when I send an email asking about the topic of our poster, an Austrian student replied that he liked the Netflix topic, which I had in Excel next to my name. And I had to write to him that the topics were written in the next column, that Netflix is my hobby. And at the moment I was afraid that we wouldn’t agree on another topic.” CZ

“Different approaches and implicit assumptions led to a number of misunderstandings. It was interesting to see how language barriers add up.” AT

“We quickly agreed on the topic and started to work on a draft. After sending it to my Czech partner, I thought that she would elaborate on it. Yet, she did not receive anything and worked on her own version instead — which was a stupid misunderstanding and led to confusion and frustration.” AT

TABLE 6: Misunderstandings.

4.1.3 PROGRAM DIFFERENCES

The students had to coordinate their different working schedules and levels of study, additional school or work duties, the age gap and frequently related family responsibilities.

Age and the related student status (Table 7) were the most frequently mentioned differences between the partners. While the Czech students were full-time students in their early twenties whose main occupation was their study, their Austrian

counterparts were part-time students of an older age with a full-time job. Both partners, therefore, needed to cope with different priorities, degrees of experience, sets of responsibilities and time availability, which definitely required compromises.

“At the beginning when we were arranging our online meeting, we were chatting online. He wrote that he is still at work, but it was half past eight at the evening. I was surprised. Then during our online session, I understand that he is much older than me and has a full-time job. It was surprising for me. I imagined a student like me behind the emails.” CZ

“Only one negative aspect was the problem with organization of the meetings, because he was part-time student, which means, he was working all week and has time from Friday till Sunday, but we were able to manage to schedule meeting also on Monday or Wednesday.” CZ

“I had the feeling that my Czech colleague took the assignment much more seriously; she was very worried about the deadline and the outcome. Being a part-time student, I have also other fish to fry; which was why I did not place such a big focus on it.” AT

“It became obvious that the Czech students were full-time students that dedicated most of their time to their studies. I was busy working and had numerous projects apart from this cross-border assignment.” AT

TABLE 7: Age and student status gap.

Different time span of the semesters (Table 8) and school schedules between the two universities impeded availability, too. The data reveal struggles to organize meetings, complete the mutually agreed tasks, or fully engage in the project at times in between other school or work duties, such as mid-term or final exams. To complete the task successfully, a considerable amount of patience, effort and compromise was necessary.

“Communication was significantly slower and complicated communication due to significant differences in school schedules and connecting responsibilities (examination period etc.)” CZ

“Difficult to find the same time slot to work on the project (misaligned schedules)” AT

“It was hard to juggle tasks and to coordinate these semi-formal working meetings — but it was worth it.” AT

TABLE 8: Schedule mismatch.

4.1.4 WORKING HABITS

Disparate working habits turned out to be another issue the students facilitated with each other. The most frequent cause of frustration were discrepant attitudes to time management (Table 9) that manifested in attitudes to work organization, respect for deadlines or forward planning. Most complaints came from students who tended to follow plans or aimed to complete their work in advance and were paired with students exercising a more relaxed approach. Most of these claims came from the Czech students for whom studies were the main area of activity.

“When my partner was not answering my email for a long time, I was upset that in the beginning of semester is enough time to get the work done.” CZ

“The biggest problem was finding contact with a colleague. For a long time, she wrote no contact for herself. Only after several urgings did she respond to the email and we contacted via WhatsApp. The waste of time was a negative experience and stress from the approaching deadline.” CZ

“I had the feeling that my partner did not understand how much I needed to juggle tasks — I was not just a student, but also worked full time and had family commitments; so, a more relaxed approach would have been helpful.” AT

TABLE 9: Attitude to time.

Cooperation projects pose higher demands on individualists (Table 10). Some of the students mention struggles with enforcing their topics, but most finally came to a mutually satisfying agreement. As previously mentioned, one of the Czech students, however, decided to withdraw from the cooperation, regardless of the impact on the final evaluation, claiming he preferred to work alone. Another tandem argued in favor of working individually for similar reasons, but aspiring for a good grade, they accepted the compromise. One pair, although finding a mutual topic, did not agree on the project completion procedure and each partner completed their own poster, later admitting they hoped this would go unnoticed by their advisors.

“The topic was not the cup of tea between each other, better to create it alone.” CZ

“At the beginning we couldn’t agree on to correct topic and I could try to make a poster myself. But finally, we agreed on topic of Fukushima disaster.” CZ

“After some time, I ran out of patience and it became clear to me that I would do a better job working alone.” AT

TABLE 10: Autonomy.

A conflicting degree of responsibility or quality standards (Table 11) was another frequent issue. Some students pointed out either taking the lead or doing a larger portion of the work due to a less involved attitude of their partner.

“In our first email we agreed on the topic, but after that student from Austria just wrote me that he don’t know what we have to do. I had to explain him everything. He said: understand. But did nothing after that, so I did most of the work, and pushed him to do research in Austria.” CZ

“I had to take lead to finish project and did most of the work”. CZ

“There were loads of typos in the poster. So, I started telling her to correct even the smallest mistakes. I am quite a perfectionist and wanted a good mark.” AT

TABLE 11: Degree of responsibility.

4.1.5 EFFORT AND TIME

At the time of the lockdowns, many students perceived growing self-study demands from other subjects, the project notwithstanding. Effort and time (Table 12) dedicated to the projects was one of the objections the students mentioned on both sides, with a slightly higher frequency in the Austrian data.

“Working on a project like that is quite time-consuming, and this semester is so demanding that it was difficult to find time for it.” CZ

“I was really worried that this would exceed by far the time that I have scheduled for these lessons.” AT

TABLE 12: Time demands.

4.2 SUCCESS FACTORS

Despite the concerns described above, the data indicate that overcoming concerns and tensions, overwhelming at the beginning, may yield satisfaction. And indeed, in a follow-up survey, the students assessed the experience predominantly as positive (Figure 1). The following text, therefore, focuses on factors and coping strategies leading to these results.

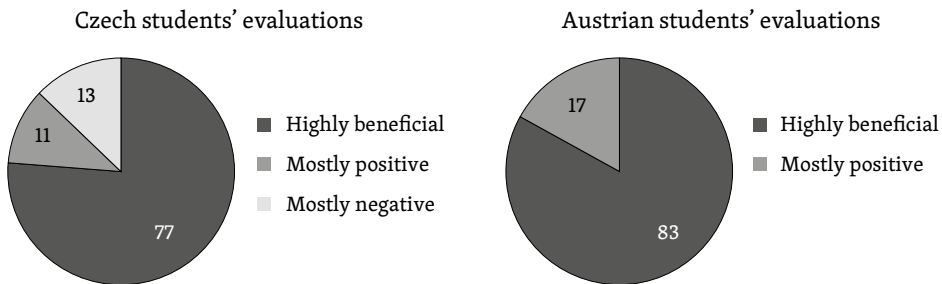


FIGURE 1: Student evaluations of the project by country.

4.2.1 COOPERATION

Willingness and quality of cooperation obviously contributed to a smooth progression, especially through aligning the partners' working styles (Table 13), be it in the area of time management, organization, preparation, project management or planning. For example, tandems that tended to plan meticulously assessed the cooperation more positively than those with conflicting attitudes. Couples focused on an early start and an efficient role division completed their projects ahead of time and to a mutual satisfaction.

“At first, I was afraid, that the work will be delayed, that’s why we need to do it so early, but my tandem partner was like me, which means, we were trying to do it as soon as possible. We divided our work pretty much in half and he was very communicative, so it was easy.” CZ

“I would say that our cooperation was really good. Both of us are hard workers and we tried hard to do the best we can.” CZ

“We set up a very clear and detailed schedule that helped us get the task done.” AT

“We agreed on a work plan and set a number of online meetings where we would discuss our steps and progress — that worked really well.” AT

TABLE 13: Compatible time management.

Equal engagement (Table 14) was another aspect contributing to a smooth cooperation. Tandems who devoted an equal effort to the completion of their tasks tended to evaluate the project experience positively as opposed to those where the amount of effort was not balanced.

“The cooperation was overall very positive and enriching. We were able to discuss everything in detail and at a high level as far as the language goes. We both took a participative approach to managing the flow of the project and both contributed to the project to the best of our abilities.” CZ

“In spite of the problems in the beginning, the cooperation was really good. We met three times on-line via Teams, prepared the questions for our survey, analyzed it and also worked on the poster together. Her English level was excellent, especially in writing. In addition, she was nice and cooperative.” CZ

“We started off great and distributed the tasks equally — that was good fun.” AT

TABLE 14: Equal engagement.

Another factor contributing to success was the ability to align the partners’ interests (Table 15). For that, the Austrian students chose their counterparts from the contact table completed on the Czech side at the beginning of the project listing personal hobbies on top of the three project topic suggestions. The sooner the Austrian students started, the better chance they had to find the best possible fit.

“The cooperation was fine for me. We chose the topic based on our hobbies, so it was a little easier for us. Communication was very effective. We divided the work proportionally and each of us developed a certain part of our tandem project. So, the experience is positive for me.” CZ

“We had very nice cooperation and were pretty keen on the topic so in the beginning we just start talking about how we like guns and we shared our experience and opinions.” CZ

“We were both into this topic and wanted to explore it further; so, we naturally liked to invest time and effort into it, even more so as we wanted to get a good grade.” AT

TABLE 15: Topic compatibility.

4.2.2 COPING STRATEGIES

As the data indicate, smooth cooperation was not always assumed. Many students mentioned a variety of coping strategies when facing hardships. For example, some mentioned assuming leadership (Table 16) when they felt uncomfortable with the speed of the progress.

“I hate doing work just before the deadline, but in group projects this happens a lot, so I always take lead to make the best possible, which somehow backfires at me. Other people talk crap about me, because I press them to do at least some work for the project.” CZ

“I did a lot of teamwork projects and every time I wanted to do it as soon as possible, so I was the one, who was doing the organization and trying to divide the work in between all of participant of the team.” CZ

“I was surprised how task-oriented my partner was and about the clear instructions that I received throughout our cooperation. He obviously wanted to take the lead.” AT

TABLE 16: Coping strategies.

To improve the efficiency of communication, some students noticed that using video calls (Table 17) compensated for the lack of personal contact, helped them create a closer bond and even facilitated the progression of their work.

“When we had our first video call, I remember the way he lives. It looked like a basement and he had so many books there. All walls were filled with books, it was interesting, and I was curious if he had read them all.” CZ

“After a few attempts, and when realizing that meeting on Teams was definitely not working, we decided to use Discord, we wanted to see each other when doing the battle plan.” AT

“She was pretty mad at me because I did not answer her, so she did most of the work alone. What she did not know is that I did not receive any messages. We managed that issue in a face-to-face online meeting.” AT

TABLE 17: Using video.

Quite a few tandems mentioned dividing roles to optimize their strengths (Table 18), claiming this approach helped achieve a higher quality of the outcome.

“We were able to balance our strengths and weaknesses. Johanna was good at something that I was not and I was good at some other skills that Johanna was weak in.” CZ

“I recognized different focus between school of thought. While I focus more on hard data, practical examples, my partner was more focusing on the abstract parts of the assignment.” CZ

“I realized that my partner was not good with design; so, I took over and handled this part.” AT

“While my partner’s English was obviously better than mine, I had more expertise in structuring content and display it well — so we split these tasks.” AT

TABLE 18: Balancing talents.

The data reveal the importance of preparation (Table 19), especially for meetings, which the students found streamlined their work. Some students even remarked that quality preparation can compensate for the online communication limits or busy schedules.

“The cooperation was good. She was always prepared for the meetings.” CZ

“Barbara was always ready and responded in a timely manner to all my messages. We had no conflicts and the cooperation went smoothly.” CZ

“We had clear deadlines and tasks to do. This worked perfectly and each one prepared for the next meeting what had to be done.” AT

TABLE 19: Preparation.

4.3 PERSONAL GROWTH

Despite initial skepticism or problems due to a high pre-existing level of uncertainty, the data indicate that students on both ends finally found the project worthwhile, mainly because they observed an increase in their personal learning curves, found a more varied portfolio of coping strategies, a critical engagement with their biases and a reflective loop of the entire experience.

4.3.1 REALIZING STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

In the tandems, the students were provided a good chance to learn, experience or reflect on their own personal growth, starting with a chance to realize their strengths and weaknesses. One of the skill categories facilitated through the cooperation were foreign language skills (Table 20). The students realized the importance of English for international cooperation. Some of them felt reservations in their vocabulary; some reevaluated their attitude to mistakes, and others mentioned receiving feedback in comparison to their partners in conversational English or in academic language when facing the project requirements.

“I learned how important it is to know a foreign language. I had to get rid of stress. And communicate alone without preparation. I also realized that mistakes are not a problem, but I have to talk so that I can eliminate my mistakes in the future.” CZ

“Honestly, my English was weaker than my partner’s. I have a place to improve.” CZ

“I know that I will have to improve my vocabulary and generally move forward in English.” CZ

“I opened an entirely new door — the one of academic English. I was not aware that the register is so different and could learn a lot from my partner as well.” AT

TABLE 20: Foreign language skills.

Another skill category students reported was management (Table 21). Some students reaffirmed or improved, others found an absence of their abilities to manage work or lead projects and teams, which they generally acknowledged as useful in the project.

“I realized that I have leader skills and should use them more often to push work results to the maximum perfection.” CZ

“I am definitively not very good in role of leader, but when I am the only one in the team who seem to be able to take the role, I am not afraid to lead.” CZ

“I have been leading many teams already, but this was really new for me. Normally, I take the lead and know how to approach the work-related tasks best. Here, we really had to negotiate the approach and find our roles.” AT

TABLE 21: Management skills.

Similarly, time management (Table 22), as mentioned earlier, frequently caused tension. A number of pairs either admitted a need for improvement or appreciated their progress throughout the project thanks to their better planning partners.

“I will have to focus better on time management.” CZ

“It was not our first project with other universities so there was not any surprising aspect of myself. My weakness is and always will be bad time management.” CZ

“The hardest part was to keep deadlines. This is much more difficult when doing a cross-border project.” AT

TABLE 22: Time management skills.

Many students rated cooperation skills (Table 23) as important through various stages, for example, when establishing their relationships, selecting topics, or organizing meetings.

“And for strengths, maybe cooperation skills, because on our debate there was only little struggle on beginning about which topic choose.” CZ

“I have realized that I feel more comfortable doing things at my own pace; however, I am aware that I need to get better at doing work at the pace that is most beneficial to the entire team.” CZ

“It was great to cooperate interculturally — especially with the previous knowledge base that we had gained throughout the class — we could immediately see whether it holds water — and it did.” AT

TABLE 23: Cooperation skills.

Further combinations of skills found helpful or improved appear in the data, building up to the 21st century skills set. A few times, students mentioned realizing their ability to make confident decisions or compromise (“I learned that I could make the decision if needed and also to find trade-offs.” CZ; “We had to find a compromise and

not all ideas could be put into practice.” AT). Others accentuated realizing their flexibility or inflexibility (“I can cooperate and possibly adapt.” CZ; “I also found one of my negative traits, that most things have to be according to me.” CZ) or stress management (“I can work under pressure.” CZ; “I was worried that my partner would not deliver. So, I really put pressure on her and scheduled hard deadlines to be successful with the task.” AT). Some, in contrast, realized their lack of patience (“My weakness was my impatience — I didn’t want to wait long for her answers in the beginning, and I quickly started to feel frustrated when she didn’t reply.” CZ; “I realized that I am quite stressful person and I want to have everything done as soon as possible and at the best quality.” CZ). One student even mentioned a lack of trusting people (“I realized that I tend to be suspicious about my partners because I have a lot of bad experience from the past. But there was no need to be suspicious.” CZ). A few students also realized their personality barriers (“I realized that my shyness was holding me back. I have to persuade myself for a long time to take the first step, but once I get into it, it’ll get a little better. But the worst is with people I don’t know.” CZ) or inadequate technical skills when working with modern technologies (“I found that I had a flair for design.” CZ; “Just one note — we had no problems meeting together via Teams, although other pairs had.” CZ).

4.3.2 EXTENDING KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING NEW SKILLS

Besides realizing their strengths and weaknesses, students mentioned their learning outcomes (Table 24). They claimed to have expanded their knowledge within the topics they studied and investigated in their research projects, expanding their horizons in topics pursued by their colleague tandems, as well as gaining new cultural perspectives from “sharing ideas and opinions” with their international partners.

“We were talking about VW and Tesla regarding electric cars... I was talking about diesel-gate, I thought that this is well-known in Austria too so I was talking about it for a few minutes and then the tandem partner asked me about what the heck is diesel-gate. To let him understand this term, I found a video about it.” CZ

“Learning something new about the topic and about actual issues (environmental, technical etc.)” CZ

“Seeing how different cultures tick and what drives them and why — that was my major learning.” AT

“To learn about the topic was one thing, but to see my partner’s perspective was another interesting aspect.” AT

TABLE 24: New knowledge.

The tandem cooperation boosted the students’ foreign language learning (Table 25). Some students appreciated the opportunity to “practice” or “test” their “English with foreigners”, and “communicate without preparation” in natural real-life situations. Many of them reported they “improved their English”, and those usually reluctant to speak liked being “forced to speak English”, because they gained more confidence.

“I learned how to explain some words in other ways.” CZ
 “I become less shy in speaking in English due to this whole course not only the project.” CZ
 “[I learned] to not be afraid of speaking and expressing my own ideas to strangers.” CZ
 “I realized that mistakes are not a problem.” CZ
 “It was great to collaborate both formally and informally in English. That really helped to improve my foreign language skills.” AT
 “It makes so much more sense to talk to persons with different mother tongues in English than to your own fellow students. This was a huge motivation for me.” AT

TABLE 25: Language learning.

The students also reported improving work-related soft skills (Table 26), out of which time management and leadership skills dominate. By dealing with the challenges related to the program schedule as well as attitudes to organization and planning, many of the students admitted they learned to plan their time and tasks more efficiently. In addition, they exercised further work-related soft skills, such as stress management, cooperation and intercultural communication, negotiation, active listening and nonverbal communication, or flexibility, some even pointed out learning empathy or dealing with uncertainty.

“I learned to become a leader of project, when it is needed (naturally I do not feel like a leader).” CZ
 “I reckon that the above-described experience is going to be very helpful at work especially considering the uncertainty surrounding the global pandemic and a lot of workplaces becoming ‘remote.’” CZ
 “I also experienced a cooperation with a person of different culture which can come in handy in today’s globalized world.” CZ
 “It showed me that communication is key and that misunderstandings can easily occur due to assumptions that your partner sees differently.” AT

TABLE 26: Soft skills.

Along with the soft skill set, many reflections referred to gaining technical and professional skills (Table 27). The students mentioned learning how to use varied online communication tools, such as programs or applications for conducting research or doing design, realizing this advanced their academic skills.

“I will use those new experience to do more infographics on other subjects.” CZ
 “My skills in power point improved significantly while trying to accomplish visual aspects of the assignment.” CZ
 “I learned how to work with Zoom and the poster drawing program.” CZ
 “To work with online tools for creating surveys and academic posters. In general, to use technology available to make long-distance work as smooth and efficient as possible.” CZ

“Working with new visuals — in my previous university I prepared many architectural posters in Illustrator, Photoshop, but this one is made online.” CZ

“Given that I am an IT student, working with online tools is nothing new to me. I realized, however, that my partner was not that versed and IT-savvy, so I taught him how to deal with them more effectively”. AT

TABLE 27: New professional skills.

Finally, the data indicate socialization aspects (Table 28) as another benefit of cooperating with peers from another country. The students valued “meeting new people”, making “international friendships”, “communicating with partners from foreign university”, sharing hobbies, interests, or working styles.

“I found another person with the same opinions that is as keen as I am on the topic.” CZ

“Cooperation with persons from the Czech Republic was a new experience for me; what was more, they also had a different disciplinary background — which made it even more challenging.” AT

TABLE 28: Social networks.

In conclusion, despite the initial reluctance and perceived cognitive overload, the tandem learning experience turned out to be highly beneficial for both student cohorts. They expanded their knowledge base, skills and competencies and learned to overcome implicit and deeply ingrained beliefs. Apart from familiarizing themselves with new topics, they learned from each other through adopting different cultural and epistemological perspectives and negotiating their points in an intercultural setting.

5 TANDEM COOPERATION PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

The success of projects depends on the quality of management. They need to be meticulously prepared, properly initiated, carefully coordinated, reflect feedback, be checked and regulated, precisely completed, and evaluated for future quality improvement. Thus, the following section outlines the adopted pedagogical approach (Table 29) with the project management S.M.A.R.T. criteria in mind. That is, to maximize the workflow and efficiency, specific goals (S) and measurable results (M) must be set, attainable tasks and outcomes (A) with relevance to time and topic (R) need to be defined, and all must be clearly time-bound (T). Based on this, the presented approach adopts a sequential approach defining individual project phases, in order to stay organized from the project plan to the end deliverable of any future project replication.

5.1 PREPARATION PHASE

For tandem projects between students from different subjects and universities, a compatible set of courses needs to be identified, although they may slightly overlap in time, frequency, or vary in the subject. They must, however, align in the aim, which can either be competence-based (e.g., language related courses) or content-based (e.g., professional subjects). Relatedly, the project requirements must be balanced, and topic areas clearly delineated so that both sides have comparable conditions and topic boundaries. At the same time, students must be given a certain degree of autonomy to fit into the scope of the topics. Balanced student numbers are an advantage.

Following this, the teachers provide detailed instructions for the students, explaining the project aim, content, requirements, evaluation criteria, and deadlines. Both sides need to have identical instructions. Remaining or odd-numbered students from larger groups should be planned for.

To facilitate cooperation between the partners, a shared platform for communication needs to be set up, for example, a table with student names, their professional interests, personal hobbies, and contact information. If circumstances allow, an on-site introductory visit at an early phase of the project and/or a final presentation visit should be planned, ideally alternating the hosts.

5.2 REALIZATION PHASE

Problems and uncertainties will likely arise at the project's start. Thus, detailed instructions in the first lesson, answering all questions, and clarifying ambiguities is necessary. Moreover, a platform for facilitating students' communication, including reporting problems and complications that might arise during the project, is needed.

The students, then, start contacting each other and negotiating their topic. After that, they divide roles and distribute work, set up a schedule for project tasks and meetings, and reserve time for finalization. In-person communication is desirable. If this is not possible, video calls are an adequate substitute.

5.3 FINALIZATION PHASE

Similarly, finalization takes place on both sides. To avoid inconsistencies between universities, evaluation criteria and deadlines need to be harmonized. Prior to submission, the supervisors provide student feedback if required. Finally, they coordinate submission and plan presentation sessions, either online or on-site. Students, then, complete their outcomes as required. They also need to pay adequate attention to editing, formatting and language corrections. Final results are presented in a set session, e.g., group presentations followed with discussions held on-site or online.

5.4 EVALUATION PHASE

A quality assessment of the projects is important for maintaining high standards for HEI teaching. To gain students' feedback, a project evaluation session in varied for-

mats needs to be scheduled. A recorded workshop or a focus group in an audio or video format, follow-up interviews as well as a paper or an online survey can bring valuable information to the project's replication and improvement.

	Teacher	Student
Preparation	Identifying compatible courses Finding overlaps Aligning requirements and indicators Setting-up deadlines Preparing written instructions Setting-up communication platform and contact list Planning a schedule for visits/meetings	
Realization	Explaining details and clarifying questions Facilitating initial communication Monitoring progress Mediating communication Problem-solving	Choosing and contacting a partner Choosing a channel for communication and sharing files Agreeing on a topic Assigning roles Setting-up deadlines Planning regular meetings
Finalization	Providing feedback Organizing submission Planning presentation sessions	Deciding on a format Agreeing on a design Corrections and revisions Proof-reading
Evaluation	Deciding on evaluation forms Analyzing data Adopting preparation	Self-evaluation Sharing experience, impressions, opinions Providing feedback to teachers Suggesting improvements

TABLE 29: Tandem cooperation plan.

6 SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Considering the difficulties and reservations that the students voiced throughout the beginning of the project, tandem cooperation may initially appear overly problematic. However, the overall result and students' satisfaction with their accomplishments, experience and learning means denying them this experience would be short-sighted. This study indicates that coping with difficulties leads to self-fulfillment, accelerates personal growth and provides the students with a head-start for succeeding in their future jobs and lives.

Indeed, through international tandem cooperation, students discover their weaknesses and strengths and place them into a wider context of further opportunities and threats. They also learn and improve the competences and skills described in the (inter)national educational strategies as key for the 21st century globally interconnected world. This project shows that cross-border cooperation positively contributes

to the students' internationally crucial English and communication skills within specific professional and cultural contexts, and refines their intercultural competences, which are key to leading an international dialogue. The students also develop important work-related soft skills, mainly time management, leadership, cooperation and critical thinking, and advance their technical and IT skills, necessary in the time of artificial intelligence and digitalization. There is also a chance for them to expand their professional and personal networks.

Tandem projects require planning and openness on the part of the implementing institution as well as a close cooperation between teachers and students. When done, these projects offer autonomy, freedom, and responsibility to students so as to deeply engage them, make them adopt a constructive approach and come up with pragmatic solutions. Integrating these projects into HEIs' curricula, their internationalization programs, and everyday pedagogical practices is an approach that can help students grow into engaged global citizens.

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