

# 5 The EUniTA project: working with international partners to develop language, intercultural, and professional competencies in European university students

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## Abstract

Language tandem exchanges offer students valuable opportunities for autonomous learning and authentic intercultural communication encounters. This paper will discuss the key principles of tandem language exchange, and in particular online ones, and then present the EU-funded European University Tandem (EUniTa) project which was developed by colleagues from seven European partner universities to create an integrated online platform, with audio/video and chat interfaces. EUniTa allows an innovative automatic matching and meets the learning needs of university students by providing them with materials to develop their Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) as well as their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). In the conclusion, areas for future research are identified to measure the success of the project and its longevity.

**Keywords:** language tandem exchange, collaborative learning, EUniTA, autonomy.

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**How to cite this chapter:** Cunico, S. (2019). The EUniTA project: working with international partners to develop language, intercultural, and professional competencies in European university students. In C. Gorla, L. Guetta, N. Hughes, S. Reisenleutner & O. Speicher (Eds), *Professional competencies in language learning and teaching* (pp. 53-64). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.34.914>

## 1. Introduction

In the last 40 years language pedagogy has seen a major shift from being teacher-led and focussed on grammar and vocabulary to a more student-centred approach with a strong emphasis on communicative competence and autonomous learning. In addition, new technologies are increasingly playing a key role in breaking down geographical, temporal, social, and language barriers by allowing instant communication around the globe and offering students opportunities for authentic language use in meaningful social contexts. Globalisation is also having an impact on the UK higher education agenda, which places increasing importance on internationalisation and the development of graduates' intercultural competence to enable them to join a multilingual and multicultural working environment. In this context, this paper describes an Erasmus+ funded European Universities Language Tandem (EUniTa, <https://www.eunita.org/>) scheme designed to connect students across Europe and enable them to develop their language and intercultural competencies. It will discuss the rationale for its creation, its pedagogical underpinning and major outcomes so far, and also identify a number of areas which will need empirical research.

## 2. EUniTa: a 21st century university tandem language learning scheme

Calvert (1992, p. 17) defined tandem learning as a *reciprocal* learning scheme in which native speakers of two different languages work together to improve their language skills and their understanding of each other's culture. As a form of peer learning, students interact in an informal learning context (Funk, Gerlach, & Spaniel-Weise, 2017; Karjalainen, Pörn, Rusk, & Björkskog, 2013; Stickler & Lewis, 2003). Brammerts (1996, cited in Woodin, 2018, pp. 9-10) argues that tandem learning is based upon three underlying principles:

- **Autonomy.** you are responsible for your own learning. Tandem learners are responsible for identifying their own needs, setting their own goals, and finding the means to achieve them.

- **Reciprocity:** you are responsible for ensuring mutual benefits. Both partners have a responsibility towards each other to help each other learn so that they benefit equally from the exchange.
- **Intercultural learning:** as learning in tandem is based upon communication between members of different language-speaking communities and cultures, it also facilitates cultural learning.

The importance of exposure to the target language as well as to opportunities to produce language output is well recognised in research (Swain, 1985) and also by language teachers and students who value the possibility of interacting with native speakers of the language they are studying. Many university foreign language centres have long organised tandem language exchanges to allow students the possibility to practice their foreign language skills. There are many tandem language schemes: at one end of the spectrum there are some which are a compulsory component of a language module, fully integrated into the syllabus and with assessed learning outcomes – such as the one described by Morley and Truscott (2001, 2003) in which students must work in pairs to complete some tasks. At the other end, there are others which are totally independent from structured credit-bearing language modules, and they can also be organised autonomously by students. What all tandem language schemes have in common is that they create social contexts in which genuine communicative needs arise equally for both participants, and language learning is socially motivated and socially-mediated (Lantolf, 2000). Increasingly, social media play a key role in both managing and advertising the schemes. For instance, at Exeter University, we manage a Facebook page (with 1,792 followers) as a platform for students to autonomously contact potential tandem partners to set up face to face language exchanges, and also to advertise monthly social events, which are attended by up to 50 students at a time.

However, a common problem in university tandem schemes is the large imbalance in supply and demand for certain native speaker combinations and organisers of tandem schemes in language centres are familiar with the scenario of not being able to meet home students' aspirations with the linguistic human

resources available at a local level. This is a great cause of dissatisfaction and frustration among students who cannot benefit from the scheme.

Since the 1990s, various technologies have offered the possibility of setting up transnational tandem schemes to resolve the imbalance between L1/L2 demands. Early examples are the exchanges coordinated by Helmut Brammerts of the Ruhr-Universität Bochum with what he calls a network of ‘bilingual subnets’ for tandem learning using the internet (Brammerts & Little, 1996) and more recently collaborative learning through Japanese-Spanish tele-tandem (González & Nagao, 2018). Such schemes are normally not available to all undergraduate students since they tend to be set up by individual teachers for their own students at the participating universities, thus limiting wider participation. In addition, since they often lack major institutional investment, they tend to rely on specific individuals’ initiatives, contacts with colleagues in other foreign institutions, and use of their own time to set them up. As a result, such schemes can be short-lived.

A quick internet search reveals that there are now a number of language tandem platforms and apps which students can access (see [https://europa.eu/youth/eu/article/54/42957\\_en\\_en](https://europa.eu/youth/eu/article/54/42957_en_en) for a list of tandem websites and apps). However, they are not necessarily suitable for higher education students: some of them appear to provide tandem matching as part of a private language learning business. They also lack institutional credentials and safety checks, and it is therefore problematic to vouch for their appropriateness for our students. Often, they present the tandem experience as unproblematic and seem deliberately oblivious to the challenges that online tandems present to their users, such as having the ability of identifying one’s own needs and means to achieve them, or finding the right match in terms of one’s needs (level of language competence, aspirations, time available, etc.):

“[a] conversation exchange or tandem is quite simple: if you speak French and want to brush up your Greek, for instance, you’ll need to find a Greek partner who is learning French” ([http://europa.eu/youth/eu/article/54/42957\\_en](http://europa.eu/youth/eu/article/54/42957_en)).

Since matching is a common problem in higher education across Europe, it was clear that there was potential to make full use of modern technologies to develop a very flexible open educational resource able to match tandem university peers transnationally and to create authentic communicative contexts for pairs of native speakers of different languages. The EUniTa project was the product of an international collaboration which developed out of the need to find a long-term solution to a shared local problem. The project was financially supported by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Programme between October 2015 and April 2019 and involved seven partner universities from five European countries – University of Exeter, University of Florence, Goethe University Frankfurt, University of Liverpool, Paris Sorbonne University, University of Poitiers, and Blanquerna, University Ramon Llull.

The unique and distinctive features of EUniTa are its dedicated and self-contained online platform accessible to any EU student who can, at the click of a finger, sign up for a tandem language exchange, get matched automatically, and find the necessary communication tools as well learning resources they may need *within* the platform itself (Figure 1).

Figure 1. EUniTa is designed as a desktop application which can be used on tablets and smartphones



### 3. The creation of a virtual social space for a professional transnational learning community

Based on new web real-time communications technology, the EUniTa platform (hosted by the University of Frankfurt) is designed to match large numbers of tandem learners without a time consuming registration and matching process. One of the greatest strengths of EUniTA is its simplicity of use and wide availability: it has been developed as an open source online tandem platform designed for multiple electronic devices including computers, tablet computers, or smartphones, and is able to connect students nearly instantaneously.

Figure 2. Quick online registration which allows instant access to tandem matches

**WHO ARE YOU?**  
*Step two - complete our profile*

**EDIT PROFILE**

**User Information**

**First Name\*** Jane

**Last Name\*** Doe

**Username\*** janedoe

**Email\*** weiss@studiumdigitale.uni-frankfurt.de

**Personal Information**

[Mehr text dazu](#)

**Mother Languages\*** English

**2nd Mother Languages** Deutsch

**Photo** Datei auswählen | Keine Datei ausgewählt

**Date Of Birth\*** 2017 | 1 | 1

**Gender\*** Female

**Academic subject/field\*** Medicine & Health sciences

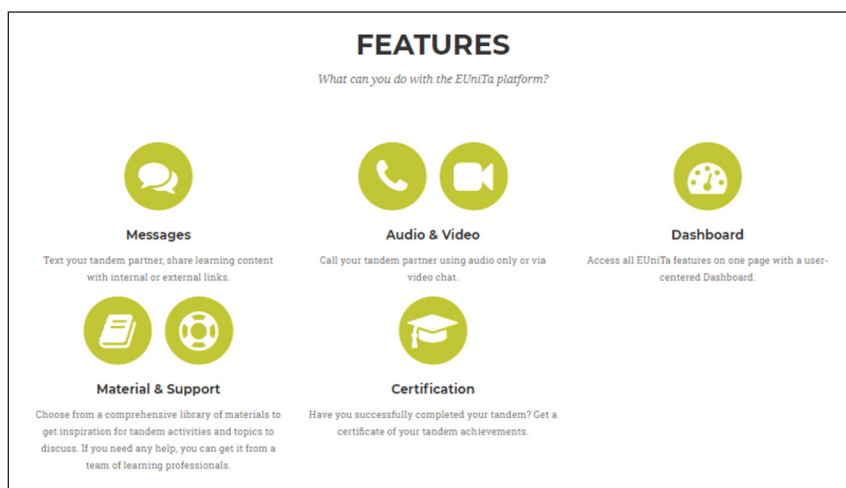
\* required field

**SAVE**

The online registration form (Figure 2) was designed taking into account a survey of approximately 500 students from all partner intuitions: it is user friendly with quick and short questions which aim to build the students' profile (age, gender, and academic discipline). Once registered the matching is automatic and students can start their tandem exchange experience straightaway.

The EUniTa platform allows students to have multiple exchanges at the same time, and to be in touch by instant messaging or audio and video chat, and to access and share supporting material tailor-made to their language competence should they need it. It also allows students to monitor their progress, and receive a certificate of participation in the tandem exchange (Figure 3), issued by their home university.

Figure 3. The EUniTa dashboard provides an overview of all the tools, activities, and material available on the platform



Since disciplinary matching is enabled, EUniTa allows students to develop their Basic Interpersonal Conversation Skills (BICS) as well as their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Although the meaning of the terms have varied, the main distinction refers to "the extent to which the meaning

being communicated is supported by contextual or interpersonal cues (such as gestures, facial expressions, and intonation present in face-to-face interaction) or dependent on linguistic cues that are largely independent of the immediate communicative context” (Cumming, 2014, p. 3).

The EUniTa library stores tailor made resources which aim to support the development of BICS: they are easily identifiable both in terms of content (society, daily life, studies and careers, health, sports, etc.) and in terms of levels of language proficiency based on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages. The resources aim to generate discussion on students’ lives, their values, and cultural practices, and by exposing them to their differences increase their intercultural awareness. When completing the registration, students can choose to provide information about their academic subject and be matched with a student from a similar academic field. The aim of this innovative feature is to support CALP, the development of a cognitively demanding language which is subject specific, relates to abstract concepts, has specialised vocabulary, and uses more complex language structures, as well as discipline specific practices such as discussing and evaluating data and reports. Students may have sufficient language competence to operate effectively in everyday situations, but they may have limited opportunities to develop CALP sufficiently well to function in a professional environment. In fact, although students may have encountered formal language used in their field of studies, it may have been decontextualised or in written texts only, disconnected from the professional practices it inhabits. With the exception of the time spent abroad studying at a partner institution, normally students have very few opportunities to use subject specific terminology and discuss discipline specific issues in a really communicative context with a native speaker of their L2.

The following screenshot provides an overview of the range of discipline-specific material and activities available on the platform (Figure 4 below).

The purpose of the CALP section is to support meaningful and purposeful encounters between L1/L2 students with common discipline backgrounds. In this way, it is hoped that EUnITA may facilitate student agency by fostering



online socialising processes based on common expertise and professional interests, whereby learners are able to co-construct contexts in which expertise and knowledge is shared among participants.

Figure 4. CALP resources and tasks available on EUniTa

▼ Social Sciences, Economics & Law						
Titel	Level	Prep.	Language			
Defining key terms	B2	Yes	Deutsch	English	Español	Italiano
Debating	B2	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Italiano
Talking about books	C1	No	Deutsch	English	Español	
Field interviews	B2	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Italiano
Discussions and predictions	B2	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Italiano
Pitching and negotiating	B2	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Italiano
Presenting research interests	B2	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Italiano
Posters and presentations	B2,C1	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Italiano
Research areas	B1,B2	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Italiano
Research methodology and presentations	B2	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Italiano
Research questions and implications	B2	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Italiano
Surveys	B2	No	Deutsch	English	Español	Italiano

## 4. Conclusion

EUniTa is now completed and will soon be ready to be used by students from all the seven original partner institutions. It will also be open to any other universities who wish to join for a small fee by signing the EUniTa consortium agreement.

Although EU funding has now come to an end, ongoing research will be needed to measure EUniTa's future success and potential limitations. Firstly, on a practical level, it will be important to verify if EUniTa has been able to successfully resolve the local matching problem and shortage of L1/L2 native

speakers for certain language combinations. The EUniTA set up and resources are presently available only in the languages of the original partner institutions (Catalan, English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish, so the participation of other European partners will be required to increase the pool of potential L1/L2 matches. Also, given that Asian languages have increased their popularity at A-level and undergraduate level, the possibility of opening up EUniTa to non-EU universities will have to be explored in the very near future to allow students the possibility to be matched with languages such as Chinese, Korean, or Japanese.

Secondly, research will be needed to test whether, and *how*, students use the online resources made available on the platform, *if* the resources provide a helpful structure to frame students' tandem exchanges or if students prefer and are able to negotiate the terms and objectives of the tandem totally autonomously. In the latter case, future research should explore how students mobilise autonomy and co-dependence in the tandem scheme.

Thirdly, the CALP resources were developed to facilitate the development of discipline specific language competence and skills, and research will be needed to measure students' interest in CALP and, looking further ahead, the degree to which CALP matching has supported the development of professional networks and long term relationships amongst transnational graduates.

Fourthly, it will be important to quantify the longevity of electronic tandem matches to see how long they endure when they are not integrated into an institutional framework, or set up and managed by a tutor who maintains some degree of authority and control over the scheme and matches. [Brammerts \(1995\)](#) identified autonomy and reciprocity as important principles for the success of tandem schemes, and research will be needed to verify the extent to which students commit themselves to the tandem exchange and/or if the simplicity of registration and matching make their commitment and investment short lived in this era of casual internet-based encounters.

Finally, while locally organised tandem schemes depend on enthusiastic staff setting them up and maintaining them, EUniTa will depend on its success and

future existence on the financial support of the institutions which are part of the consortium to meet the costs involved in the maintenance of the EUniTa digital infrastructure. In making a case for ongoing financial support, it will be important to be able to articulate, with empirical evidence, how EUniTa supports language learning and intercultural competence, which are part of many higher institutions' internationalisation agendas. Similarly, we need to demonstrate how, in a context in which English is currently the dominant European *lingua franca*, EUniTa can support the development of multilingual graduates with an international outlook in a socio-political environment which is at times divisive and increasingly problematic in terms of the reinforcement of national identity and boundaries.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the European Union funding for the EUniTa project as part of the Erasmus+ Programme, as well as our project partners and the students involved in testing and providing feedback on the platform development. I would also like to thank the two reviewers who have provided me with helpful comments.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association  
Voillans, France, [info@research-publishing.net](mailto:info@research-publishing.net)

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**Professional competencies in language learning and teaching**  
**Edited by Cecilia Gorla, Lea Guetta, Neil Hughes, Sandra Reisenleutner, and Oranna Speicher**

**Publication date:** 2019/06/08

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ISBN13: 978-2-490057-39-9 (Ebook, PDF, colour)  
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-40-5 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)  
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-38-2 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)  
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.  
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

**Legal deposit, UK:** British Library.  
**Legal deposit, France:** Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: juin 2019.

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