

Strengthening Language Skills of Cross-Border Actors

The Example of Tandem Language Courses Applied to Professional Practice

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Abstract

Cross-border cooperation in the Upper Rhine Region, which includes parts of Germany, France and Switzerland, has a long tradition, dating back to the 1960s. It is a dynamic form of cooperation that operates at various levels, for example at the political and administrative levels, but also between businesses and universities. Numerous networks, often arising from INTERREG projects, exist. Over the last few years, exchanges between citizens, stimulated by cross-border dialogues or citizens' councils, have become increasingly important. Despite this long-standing cross-border practice, there are sometimes obstacles that make cooperation more difficult. Among the obstacles cited, the language barrier is frequently mentioned. Despite the existing proximity, plurilingualism among residents, and also among administrative staff, is not a given. Research and practical experience show that language and culture are closely linked. The tandem language learning method, which is applied at the Euro-Institut with a focus on professional practice, takes this link into account. This paper aims on the one hand to provide a scientifically sound overview of the tandem method, a language learning method that focuses on interaction between learners, and on the other hand to verify the hypothesis that the tandem method is appropriate for cross-border staff.

Keywords: Cross-Border Cooperation, Cross-Border Staff, Plurilingualism, Language, Culture, Tandem Method

Introduction

The Upper Rhine Region is a trinational region with a long history of cross-border cooperation. The region includes Baden in the South-West of Germany, Alsace in France, a part of Palatinate as well as cantons of North-Western Switzerland.

Cross-border cooperation in the Upper Rhine Region has a long tradition, dating back to the 1960s. It is a dynamic form of cooperation that operates at various levels, for example at the political and administrative levels, but also between businesses and universities. Numerous networks, often arising from INTERREG projects, exist. Over the last few years, exchanges between citizens, stimulated by cross-border dialogues or citizens'

councils, have become increasingly important. Despite this long-standing cross-border practice, there are sometimes obstacles that make cooperation more difficult. Among the obstacles cited, the language barrier is frequently mentioned (Bonnafous, 2021).

Despite the existing proximity, plurilingualism among residents, and also among administrative staff, is not a given. What approaches might be possible to strengthen language skills in the border region? Research and practical experience show that language and culture are closely linked. The tandem language learning method, which is applied at the Euro-Institut with a focus on professional practice, takes this link into account. This fact, together with the consideration of some other methodological and organisational features that will be explained, allows the deduction that the method is particularly well suited to those involved in cross-border cooperation. This paper aims on the one hand to provide a scientifically sound overview of the tandem method, a language learning method that focuses on active interaction between learners, and on the other hand to verify the hypothesis that the tandem method is appropriate for cross-border staff. To this end, the author refers to the relevant literature and draws on her own experience of applying the method at the Euro-Institut. Written evaluations by learners are also analysed.

Chapter 2 will consider the current situation in the Upper Rhine Region as far as plurilingualism is concerned and is furthermore dedicated to the benefits of language skills for cross-border actors and the connections between language and culture. This analysis will help to identify the characteristics needed for a language learning method that fits to the challenges of cross-border cooperation. Chapter 3 describes the tandem method with its history and its original features. Then, in chapter 4 we will explain how the method has been adapted to the needs of professional staff in cross-border cooperation. Chapter 5 examines the outcomes of tandem language courses for learners.

In our use of the terms ‘plurilingualism’ and ‘multilingualism’, we refer to the definition provided by the Council of Europe: *“Plurilingualism is the ability to use more than one language – and accordingly sees languages from the standpoint of speakers and learners. Multilingualism, on the other hand, refers to the presence of several languages in a given geographical area, regardless of those who speak them.”* (Beacco et al. 2016)

When the term “own language” is used in the text, it refers to the language that learners primarily use in their everyday environment and for which they act as role models in the tandem language course. This will usually be their first language or native language.

When we mention face-to-face courses as a part of our “cross-border tandem method”, we refer to courses that are held on site. Online courses are perfectly possible and are indeed organised, but they are not specifically dealt with in this paper.

Plurilingualism in a border region, taking the example of the Upper Rhine region

Before considering the cross-border space of the Upper Rhine Region, we should introduce some numbers that show, in general, the importance of cross-border regions in Europe. Actually 40% of the EU territory are border regions. According to Eurostat, border regions in the European Union are “those regions with a land border, or those regions where more than half of the population lives within 25 km of such a border.” (Eurostat, Glossary). This concerns 30% of the EU population, which means about 150 million people. It therefore stands to reason that the living conditions on the border are by no means a marginal phenomenon. It is a fact that these living conditions are not the same as in the central region of a country. We often have rural regions, whereas the economic centres are located in conurbations, which are often easier to reach. But also as far as services, education or cultural initiatives are concerned, border regions are disadvantaged, simply because people’s lives are often confined to a field of view of 180 degrees rather than the 360 degrees one would normally expect. Expanding this view, with all the possibilities linked to it, is one of the main purposes of cross-border cooperation.

Border regions are often regarded as real-world laboratories for European integration. It is in these areas that solutions to border obstacles are developed and tested, for example in fields such as education, citizen participation or labour mobility.

The current situation regarding plurilingualism in the Upper Rhine region

The field of labour mobility is a very important issue for cross-border cooperation. All over the European Union, there are nearly 2 million commuters who cross the border daily to reach their workplace; in the Upper Rhine region there are about 100,000 commuters who cross the borders between France, Germany and Switzerland. Of course, for all these persons an institutional cross-border support is needed and is provided.

In the German-French-Swiss Upper Rhine region, cross-border cooperation has a long tradition that has been steadily developing since the 1960s. Besides cooperation between administrations and other institutions, there are numerous projects which often create durable networks. Furthermore, the region offers numerous cross-border institutions, i.e. organisations that are supported by institutions from the two or three countries and sometimes have a specific cross-border or European legal form. The languages used in the context of cross-border cooperation are French and German. The Swiss cantons concerned are in the North-West of the country and are German-speaking. So, how do we deal with the two languages? The not so clear answer is: it depends.

In the three country parts forming the Upper Rhine Region, language skills concerning the neighbouring language are declining. The situation is better than in other parts of the concerned countries, but we clearly see that there are less language competences nowadays than some years ago. If we look at the Alsatian part, the situation is not so bad. A survey realised in Alsace (*Etude sociolinguistique sur l’alsacien et l’allemand*, 2022) shows that 54% of

the respondents say, that they speak German very well or quite well. It is important to know that 41% of the sample were aged 55 and more. 30% of the respondents were already retired. In Baden-Württemberg (Germany), we also note a decline of French learners. Currently, only 24.3% of them learn the neighbouring language (Destatis, Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023). Four languages are spoken in Switzerland: German, French, Italian and Romansh. So, Switzerland is a typical example for a multilingual country which means that several languages are spoken by different groups of the population. As far as the North-Western cantons are concerned, the language used is German; in spoken language, however, it is an Alemannic dialect.

Having considered the general linguistic situation, we will now turn our attention to language use in the context of cross-border cooperation and cross-border contacts.

As a matter of fact, there is a certain “cross-border community”, which means actors who work regularly with partners from the neighbour countries, that does not have any language problems. This group of experts is plurilingual, because communication with the partners from abroad is part of their job. We are talking here about policy officers for international cooperation in local or regional administration or those experts who work at cross-border institutions. This is a group for which crossing the border and work with their colleagues from the neighbour country is not a significant issue because it happens very often. Consequently, there are no communication problems, and meetings are often held by using two languages. They often use a technique which is called passive language competence i.e. everyone uses his or her own language and is perfectly able to understand the neighbouring language, or a group chooses, not always consciously, the language that is the easiest for everyone.

Difficulties can be noticed within temporary projects, but also in the context of labour mobility and meetings between pupils or citizens. Also, in institutional meetings, the participants sometimes do not have enough language competences to express themselves in the neighbouring language or to understand the colleagues from the neighbour countries. In such situations, interpretation is usually used.

Undoubtedly, the language barrier still exists and, moreover, is frequently cited as an obstacle to cross-border cooperation.

The benefits of language skills for cross-border actors and professional staff

Yet, plurilingualism is an important political and institutional topic in the Upper Rhine Region. Especially when citizens are asked which obstacles they see for a more intense cross-border cooperation, they very often mention the so-called language barrier. And the political and institutional levels do hear them. So, “bilingualism”, which is the term frequently used, is mentioned in several treaties, and at the local and regional level, efforts are made in order to provide more possibilities to children and adults to improve their language skills. Plurilingualism is widely encouraged and supported.

In the following, we turn our attention to the group of cross-border actors, who work regularly or as part of a temporary project with their colleagues from the neighbour country. They often have basic knowledge, but not enough skills to practise the neighbouring language during a conversation or a meeting. Of course, interpreting or bilingual moderation can help, but direct communication fosters a closer bond and makes it possible to clarify any outstanding issues spontaneously. Besides these direct outcomes, there are also more specific consequences. Lüdi explains e.g. that plurilingualism offers benefits to individuals, employers and society alike. A significant advantage is, of course, mutual understanding, but according to Lüdi, plurilingualism creates neural connections that have a positive impact on creativity and performance (Lüdi, 2017). So, thanks to plurilingual actors, we not only enjoy the direct benefits of seamless communication, but also a range of other positive effects.

So, how can the situation of cross-border actors with poor language skills be improved?

Several aspects have to be considered when choosing a learning method for this group of persons:

- These are persons who often have to combine working and family life; so, time and organisation is an important aspect
- Language learning must take into account the individual expectations of learners
- The learning method should be adaptable to a professional context, that means it should allow integrating topics and vocabulary which matters for their daily work
- Learning a language for professional benefits is a strong incentive. So, it helps if the employer recognises and values this initiative, and perhaps holds out the prospect of new job opportunities
- Language learning must take advantage of the proximity of neighbouring linguistic spaces (Faucompré, 2019). France and Germany are geographically close: take the example of Strasbourg and Kehl, where the Rhine separates the two countries. Several bridges link the two municipalities, the Strasbourg tram runs as far as Kehl, and residents enjoy a shared park, the *Jardin des deux rives*. Elsewhere, the proximity is even greater in some places, as one need only cross a street to find oneself in the neighbouring country. Using this multilingual ecosystem is a real advantage and an excellent opportunity to learn the neighbouring language or to improve one's language skills.
- Different cultures and cultural openness are essential in the context of language learning. Ideally, learning a language should go hand in hand with getting to know the neighbouring country and the colleagues there.

The connections between language and culture.

The link and the interaction of language and culture is essential and has to be taken into account in order to give learners the possibility to develop language skills that are not abstract, but living knowledge and that can be developed through experience.

Byram/Feng clarify, “that it is not the purpose of teaching [...] to change learners into members of another culture, but to make them part of the group who see themselves as mediators, able to compare, juxtapose and analyse” (Byram/Feng, 2004).

Jürgen Erfurt explains that communities and individuals, with their languages and cultures, do not exist in isolated spaces, but are interconnected with other communities and individuals across borders. Language plays an important role in these processes. (Erfurt, 2019). Of course, cultural differences are significant in the context of international cooperation. One solution is however not to focus on the differences, but on the commonalities, which is the essence of transculturality. And this is exactly what can work when learning a language. Learners need a purpose and this might be, as we explained above, a professional motivation, but also enthusiasm for a certain sport, for a hobby or, which is the best way, the commitment to a common cause.

The tandem method presents several specificities, and the link between language and culture is an important one. One inherent characteristic of the method is that language and culture are learnt simultaneously, as a matter of fact rather through experience than through lessons. Claire Kramsch inquires: “[...] *given that we want to teach language in such a way that learners are initiated into its social and cultural meanings, how many of these meanings must be made explicit, how many can be understood implicitly? How can a foreign way of viewing the world be taught via an educational culture which is itself the product of native conceptions and values?*” (Kramsch, 1993). This is in fact a key question concerning language learning in a professional context. For adults who want to improve their language skills in order to feel more confident in the working environment of cross-border cooperation, it is crucial not to limit their learning to the four classical skills of *listening, speaking, reading and writing*, but to go further and, as a first step, to be aware “*that language use is indissociable from the creation and transmission of culture*” (ibid.). This is an important step that has to be understood by learners and by teachers. According to the applied learning methods, learners can dive more or less deeply into the “other” culture, which allows them to react in a sensitive way on cultural obstacles or misunderstandings, but also to familiarise themselves with contents that are useful for their studies or their working fields.

According to Byram/Feng “*culture learning is perceived as less feasible if confined to the classroom than language learning. It needs to be experiential and experience of difference has to be at the centre of learners’ and teachers’ attention*” (Byram/Feng, 2004). And they go on to explain that “*tandem-learning, originally developed as a means of enhancing linguistic competence, is a means of creating opportunities for culture learning*” (ibid.).

We see that a method intended to fit to these challenges should provide the possibility to consider cultural aspects and allow actors to get in touch with colleagues from the neighbour country which is feasible, given the short distances in the border region. Furthermore, the method should be based on professional practice and be flexible in terms of time. The tandem method which will be presented in the next chapter seems to meet these requirements.

The tandem method as a tool to strengthen language skills

Tandem learning itself, the pure method, is nothing new. As a matter of fact, it had been developed in the 1960s in the context of binational language courses by the *French-German Youth Office*, even if nowadays characteristics concerning learner autonomy have become more and more important (Brammerts, 2010). Tandem learning is particularly well suited to today's demands for lifelong and collaborative learning.

What are its main characteristics, and how does it work? First, we would like to suggest a definition offered by Brammerts:

“In tandem language learning, two persons with different native languages communicate with each other in order to learn together and from one another. Both try

- *to improve their ability to communicate in their partner's native language*
- *to learn more about their partner and his or her cultural background, as well as*
- *to benefit from the partner's other knowledge and experience, for example in the areas of work, education or leisure” (ibid.)¹*

An important principle of tandem learning is the principle of reciprocity. Two persons regularly work together in a learning partnership. They support one another by each partner contributing the knowledge the other needs in order to achieve their individual learning goals. **Autonomy** is another important principle of the tandem method. It means that each partner is responsible for his or her own learning. The learners define their learning objectives themselves, and they decide in which way (online meeting, e-mail contact, etc.) they want to achieve them. Furthermore, they have to schedule the time slots for their meetings or other contacts with their partners, and they are asked to express which sort of support they would like to receive by the partners. This might be improvements of a written text, indications concerning pronunciation or help as far as the use of idioms is concerned etc. (see Brammerts, 2010). Regarding learner autonomy which has grown in importance over the years, David Little *“argues for an understanding of language learner autonomy in which the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency are mutually supporting and fully integrated with each other”* (Little, 2007)

A very important general objective of the tandem method is the ability to communicate, in other words, to improve one's oral and written expression. Moreover, the method offers the possibility to know more about the partner's professional or other qualifications and

1 Original text in German

about the partner's cultural background. (Brammerts, 2010). In practice, the two partners may talk about the job of one of them, e.g. of a social worker in France, his or her tasks, daily challenges, the institutional framework, career possibilities, and so on. The exchange can be very practice-oriented if both of them have the same profession, but topics can also be found for persons with different jobs, e.g. remote working, work-life balance, mobility, etc., if the work-oriented focus is requested.

It is through this link between practising the language and discussing topics – in other words, putting new language skills into practice – that authentic communication takes place. It is important, that both partners benefit of the exchange. This is essential for a long-lasting partnership. In practice, that means that the common learning time has to be fairly shared (see Brammerts, 2010). For example, during 30 minutes partner A helps partner B to achieve his or her objectives; over the next 30 minutes, the opposite will take place. It is important to note that the learning partners do not teach. They help their partners as far as their own skills enable them. It is however important that tandem partners have a good knowledge of their own, native language and that they make a careful use of it which means that they speak distinctly, slowly, if needed, and that they use standard language.

Another noteworthy feature of the method is that it does not promise perfection. This might be a relief for language learners, especially those, who would like to use their new language skills immediately. As explained above, tandem means that one learner learns from another; it's a case of give and take. Yet the question may be asked if the outcome is satisfactory, or even if perfect language skills can be achieved. It is crucial to understand that the objective of the tandem method is not perfection, but the ability to communicate and to use the language in a given context, which might be the exchange of professional knowledge with the tandem partner.

Indeed, plurilingualism does not mean that one speaks one language well or perfectly and then adds another language. Individuals who speak several languages at different levels will make a different use of these languages. They will have an integrated language repertoire and "*the individual in question draws upon both his/her general and language skills and knowledge [...] in different ways*" (Council of Europe, 2001). (See also Lüdi 2017, Polzin-Haumann/Reissner, 2013).

So, in a nutshell, for a successful tandem partnership the principles of autonomy and reciprocity are essential. We see that the method is very flexible because, within a partnership, the two partners can choose different objectives. The partners are free to schedule their appointments, but it is important to keep them. However, there is one restriction: the method is not adapted to beginners. Learners should have an A2/B1 level in order to really benefit from the learning partnership. It is absolutely not necessary that the two partners have the same language level. Though, it is important for each partner to have a good command of his or her own language so that they can be a language model for their tandem partner.

Tandem courses provided by the Euro-Institut – an adapted methodology

At the Euro-Institut, tandem courses are offered in order to give the target groups the possibility to improve their language skills in a practice-oriented way. Besides the methodology itself, in terms of training, the cooperation on an institutional level is very important, too. The institutional context is in fact the third pillar of the method, besides the face-to-face sessions and the distance learning.

The institutional context

The Euro-Institut's target groups are mainly public service employees and other cross-border actors from France, Germany, Switzerland, and other European countries. That means that the Euro-Institut works closely with these institutions, some of which, as a matter of fact, are members or partners of the organisation. The organisation of tandem courses for a German and for a French municipality in the border region, which also maintain an active partnership, is an example of this institutional background. Public authorities, such as those in the fields of justice or occupational health and safety, which maintain cross-border contacts, have also supported this exchange through tandem courses, as have time-limited cross-border projects and the higher education sector. This way to organise tandem courses, in direct cooperation and on behalf of the institutions, has the advantage that these institutions can give the available places to the really concerned actors. For the Euro-Institut, as a contractor, this approach means that it can expect stable groups and participants who commit to taking part for the planned duration. The learners have, in general, the possibility to participate in the courses during their working time. The face-to-face parts of the courses are very often organised in-house, in a room provided by one of the participating institutions, and for these, the course is often more than a training: They actually welcome the learners as representatives of their partner institution. So, the learners feel very comfortable, because they are supported by their own and warmly welcomed by the partner institution. This is a good starting point for a successful language course.

The participants

In general, there are groups of 10 French and 10 German learners which allows creating 10 French-German tandems. As outlined above, the method is not adapted to absolute beginners. Since the participants are supposed to talk with their tandem partners from the very first day of the course, a certain knowledge, A2 or better B1, should exist. But we made the experience that participants who had quite poor language skills, but were open-minded, interested and committed, were able to progress quickly or refresh their knowledge on the basis of limited prior knowledge. The tandem method is based on communication, so, the ability and the will to communicate are crucial. Cohesion within the group is indeed important for learning progress (see also Rohrbach/Winiger, 2001).

When participants feel comfortable, they enjoy communicating and are motivated to learn more. In general, the learners really appreciate meeting up as a group. They feel connected, and sometimes, especially the permanent tandems become friends and stay in contact.

One of the first tasks at the beginning of a new course is the composition of the tandems. Who will work with whom during the course? The best situation to build up tandems is when both groups work in the same sector, e.g. social work, justice, culture, and so on. If learners from the same sector work together, one can be sure, that they have information to share. But still, it is good to take into account other aspects, too: is one of them a high hierarchical person and the other not, are there other characteristics that do not match, for example age or personality? These are aspects to have in mind, but it does not mean that tandems can't be formed when there are disparities.

In general, we have mixed groups and have to create tandems according to other characteristics than the professional ones. There are different possibilities:

- The participants create the tandems themselves: They describe themselves by choosing pictures and symbols, and the trainers form pairs based on the greatest similarities.
- We use the speed tandem method, which means that the German and French participants chat for just a few minutes to get to know the whole group quickly. By asking a few questions, they try to find out a bit about their potential learning partners so that they can form suitable tandems.
- The tandems are created by the trainers based on information provided, such as the professional activity, hobbies, or interests.

All these approaches have been tried and they work, even if there is no guarantee for sympathy or the same learning intensity. However, it is rare for a tandem partnership to fail completely, as the participants are generally motivated. As mentioned in chapter 3, different language levels within a tandem aren't a problem. It is important to speak well one's own language and to be a useful model for the partner. The only restriction to mention would be that two learners with very few language skills should not form a tandem. The communication would be too cumbersome, at least at first, and could lead to frustration.

Face-to-face learning

The tandem courses consist of a certain number of face-to-face sessions, often six, and so-called eTandem phases. During the face-to-face sessions the participants learn together, supported by the learning coaches, in various settings, the whole day long. During the eTandem phases, the tandems work together at a distance and autonomously.

A face-to-face session has the objectives to place the framework, to give information to learners, e.g., about available exercises and topics, and, particularly, to introduce the tandem method and to guide learners towards independent studying. Furthermore, learners have the possibility to test and to reactivate their language skills in a setting where they can

receive feedback and support from their learning coaches. In the beginning of the course, activities to get to know each other are important in order to create the very important cohesion within the group (see subchapter above). The learning coaches also help learners to set their learning goals. This is an important step, because the tandem method requires autonomy (see chapter 3), which in turn requires precise objectives. Each face-to-face session is dedicated to a certain topic. This can be the participants' professional activities, cross-border project management, intercultural communication, or other topics that are suitable for the group. The core of the course days consists of exercises in tandem. In the beginning, the tandems discuss quite easy topics, often of everyday life, in order to get accustomed to the method and to reactivate their language skills. The learning coaches ask them first to respect the time slots reserved for each language and not to switch to the other language if it starts to become difficult. Furthermore, the learners are asked to speak slowly and distinctly, particularly in their first (native) language. A second step is to ask the tandem partners to agree on the feedback they would like to have, for example, feedback on pronunciation, on vocabulary, etc., and when and in which form they would like to receive it (see Little, 2010). There is also time provided to take notes, e.g., new vocabulary or terms. As it turned out, most learners are satisfied to have some "homework". It seems that these tasks help them structuring the phase of autonomous learning. We made the experience that this preparation helps to ensure that the following days of the course are interesting and engaging. Examples are the preparation of a short sequence of a city tour in the target language, the presentation of one's job or a brief research on a specific topic. For some learners, oral presentations are a good way to prepare for similar situations at work.

The autonomous distance learning or eTandem

Between each face-to-face session, which takes in general place once a month, there are about four weeks of autonomous distance learning, the so-called eTandem phase. During this period, the tandems are expected to be in contact several times in order to learn together.

As with face-to-face tandems, the learners decide on the topic, the level and the way in which he or her wishes to learn and to be corrected. The native-speaking tandem partner adapts to these needs. This means that, in an eTandem session, the topic, language level and type of correction are likely to be completely different in one language compared to the other (Euro-Institut, 2014/2026). The tandem partners are advised to communicate by phone, by e-mail, or online. They can choose their topics according to their current needs in their jobs or, for example, in the context of a planned trip, or they can select ideas in worksheets provided to them by the learning coaches.

At the start of the course, the participants receive a work plan to help them organise their eTandem sessions with their partners. The challenge for the tandem is to really take the time to communicate regularly, which is crucial for their progress. If one of the two is not committed and not ready to organise regular meetings, this means a significant loss of learning opportunities for the partner.

The trainers or learning coaches

The tandem courses are coordinated and accompanied by two language trainers, a French native speaker and a German native speaker. Both speak the other trainer's language. Although trainers usually speak in their native language, it is still very helpful to be proficient in the other language as well. Particularly at the start of the course, learners sometimes need guidance in their own language, which means that verbal instructions need to be translated. Usually, one of the two language trainers introduces the activity in the language in which it is conducted. If not all learners understand this, the other language trainer can provide support in the other language. This applies in particular to guidance on methodology, learning strategies, or organisational matters.

Trainers do not teach, strictly speaking, but rather provide support. They coordinate the course as a whole, i.e. they determine the focus for each course day, they select the most appropriate method for forming the tandems, they are easy to reach and available for the participants when there are questions or difficulties. Their main task is to prepare and to structure the course sessions, select suitable exercises and, where necessary, adapt them for the group. During the course day, they moderate and organise the day and motivate the participants. On the one hand, structure is of course necessary in order to achieve the group's learning objectives, but experience shows that a certain flexibility is beneficial, too. Sometimes, there are learners who would like to share a presentation about a topic which is interesting for the group, sometimes participants are the source for new learning methods, e.g. the walking tandem, which combines a walk with a tandem exercise.

Measurable results of the tandem language courses

The objective of language courses, especially when they are organised or commissioned by institutions for their staff, is a sustainable impact. It is essential that participants are making progress and that they can make good use of their newly acquired competences. Therefore, after each course, an evaluation is realised in order to have a first outcome as far as the participants' perceptions are concerned. In 2025 we exploited the answers of 30 respondents from two courses, one six-month course and one three-month course. For example, we wanted to know: "What are your most important achievements concerning your language skills?" They answered as follows:

- Expansion of (technical) vocabulary (9)
- It is now easier for me to speak (even in complex situations) (7)
- Activate knowledge (4)
- Listening, comprehension (4)
- Formulating sentences.

Another open-ended question we asked explored the relationship between language and culture. The question was, "What are your most important achievements as far as culture is concerned?" The participants answered as follows:

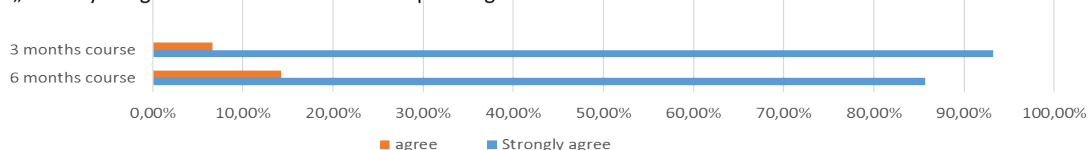
- System differences and discussions about them (6)
- Getting to know cultural differences and communication styles (4)
- Networking / thinking about a further language course and work shadowing (3)

These results are partly attributable to the professional context of the language course. The participants were interested in the institutional structures in neighbouring countries. They also mentioned cultural differences and different communication styles. It is positive that at least three participants are motivated to continue their language learning and/or to do a job shadowing in the neighbour country.

Concerning the connection between language and culture, we asked the groups: „Would you agree with the statement that plurilingualism and intercultural communication reinforce each other?“ The participants responded affirmatively with 100%, the very most of them "strongly agreed". None of them chose "neutral" or "disagree" or "strongly disagree".

Single choice question:

„Would you agree with the statement that plurilingualism and intercultural communication reinforce each other?“



Graphic: Euro-Institut, 2025

The participants recognised that language skills enable them to better perceive and deal with cultural differences. On the other hand, many found that the differences aroused their curiosity, and, with the help of language, they wanted to learn more about structures, functioning, and communication styles.

We also wanted to know more precisely which impact the course had on further exchanges in cross-border communication and asked the participants to react to the following statement: “I feel more confident about further exchanges with partners from neighbouring countries”. The participants could choose between “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neutral”, “disagree” and “strongly disagree”. What is interesting to note is that nearly 70% of the learners of the six-month course agreed strongly, whereas this was only the case for nearly 50% of the three-month learners. This shows on the one hand that there has been a real outcome and on the other hand that the duration of the course has a measurable positive effect on the outcome.

Conclusion

In order to practice a dynamic and successful cross-border cooperation, language skills are a crucial factor. Of course, translation and interpretation can help, but direct communication strengthens personal relationships, limits misunderstandings, and is less expensive. However, the language barrier is still mentioned as being one of the most important cross-border obstacles. When choosing a learning method for the group of cross-border actors, on whom we focused here, several aspects have to be considered. There are practical and organisational aspects like the work-life balance and the professional context, but also the connections between language and culture.

The tandem method combines mutual learning and immediate application of the newly acquired knowledge. Reciprocity and autonomy are important principles of this language learning method, as well as the interest in the cultural background and the partner’s professional knowledge or other qualifications or experiences. Due to the learner autonomy, the method is particularly adapted to working people, and it allows, furthermore, to adjust the topics to the learners’ needs.

Moreover, the documented feedback of tandem course participants shows that many of the objectives set are being achieved, e.g., the expansion of technical vocabulary or a greater assurance in communication with partners from neighbouring countries. These results confirm the theory that the tandem method is an appropriate tool for language courses in the field of cross-border cooperation.

The Euro-Institut’s experience relates in particular to tandem language courses in the context of cross-border cooperation, which means here a regional context. However, with the necessary adjustments, such courses can also be delivered in other settings. For participants who do not come from the same region, an intensive course during several days would be another model. There is experience with a course of five consecutive days

or another with two phases of several days each. For regular courses over a certain time, online courses are a good alternative, even if in this context the personal contacts that are very important for the learning outcomes (see chapter 4) are significantly lower.

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