



Tandem for beginners

As a tandem beginner it is recommendable to take a **course** or to work with a self-learning course along with the tandem sessions. Hence, you are continuously provided with new material you can process and use. However, it is in the nature of a tandem that you learn things or gets input that are treated in a course book much later. On the one hand, this is one of the advantages of a tandem: You learn what is needed at the very moment. On the other hand, the input is less structured than in a conventional course.

Preparation

A proper **preparation** is vital in a tandem for beginners. You should prepare for every tandem session (because you will profit much more), but as a beginner it is even more important since without any preparation it might happen that you cannot say anything at all. Preparation may include:

- Think about what you could work on with your partner. E.g.
 - spell letters and numbers
 - read a text or a dialogue from a textbook aloud
 - tell your partner what you are going to do at the weekend or after the tandem (if the language in questions allows to talk about the future in an easy way)
 - tell the other person what you did last week (if you already know the past tenses a little)
 - prepare a chapter of a coursebook, you want to discuss with your partner
 - ...
- Think of vocabulary and language structures that are needed for the exercises you would like to do. Of course, you can always ask your tandem partner, but if you think about it before, your current knowledge is already activated. You may still ask your partner about anything you could not find out.
- Search for materials in advance. Take them along and prepare them.

Materials

Visual materials are highly recommended. They allow your tandem partner to understand and help you in a specific way. Vice versa, they help you to remember what you wanted to say. Especially when you do not have a lot of vocabulary yet, one might easily lose track. The visual material does not have to be ready-made material. It is also possible to draw a sketch by yourself in order to support your statement.

Some ideas for working with visual materials

- You can talk about various countries by means of a simple map (where are they situated, what are their capitals, who are their neighbors, which languages are spoken...). You can also talk about your last holidays (I was in Spain for a week. We visited X. There you find...etc.)

- Similarly, photos may be used to present your family, living place, favorite holiday destinations or to talk about yourself. This is useful when practicing how to describe places and people.
- With the help of sketches you can explain what your flat looks like or describe which way you take to get to your place of work or where your favorite restaurant is located.

Another helpful means are **tables** or **lists**, which are filled in individually and are then used as a conversation topic.

- Both tandem partners draw a timetable for the next week and try to figure out a date (e.g. for their next session, to go to the cinema), without showing the timetables to each other. It is advisable to study times, weekdays and the names of some activities beforehand.
- The learner and the native speaker formulate questions together (e.g. What is your favorite meal? Do you like chocolate? When do you usually go to bed?), but answer them individually. The native speaker should support the learner with vocabulary if necessary. Finally, one partner interviews the other (questions can be asked in random order).
- Both learner and native speaker choose three fictional or famous people and note when they get up, have lunch or on which weekday they go to work. Afterwards, you tell your partner the names of the chosen individuals and ask each other questions about them.

As a tandem beginner it is important to have **realistic expectations**, and to **choose exercises one can accomplish**. If you have only been learning a language for a month, you will not be able to hold a fluent presentation of ten minutes. Certain topics are just not suitable for beginners. For example, it is rather unrealistic for a beginner to explain the political system of his/her country. However, one can soon present the most important facts of his/her country (number of inhabitants, size, capital, famous sights, specialties etc.)

A feasible task that is helpful for “real life” is to learn phrases in the target language that are often used in the tandem. E.g:

- How do you sayin....
- What means...
- What is the opposite of...
- How do you pronounce...
- I have got a question...
- I don't understand...
- Oh, I see.
- Is this correct?
- What is the difference between...and...
- ...

Such phrases enable you to use target language during your sessions. Furthermore, they also help to manage other situations. Ideally, one starts with a few sentences, uses them regularly and widens his/her repertoire of phrases continuously.

Cornelia Steinmann, Head of the Self-Access Center UZH/ ETH (Translation: Stéphanie Maurer)