Tips for tandem learners

If you start a tandem partnership as a complete beginner, we recommend that you do a language course, either in class or as self-study, at the same time. This will ensure a continual progression in your learning. However, tandem learners tend to learn things that they would not find in books. This is one of the advantages of tandem learning: You learn precisely what you need to know. However, learning in a tandem partnership is much less structured than in a conventional language course.

Preparation

In order to get the full benefit of tandem learning, tandem learners at all levels need to prepare well for their meetings. If you are a beginner in your target language, the need for preparation is even greater, because without it, you will not be able to communicate.

For your preparation, you could:
- Think about what you could do during the next session, for example,
  - Practice numbers or letters of the alphabet
  - Read a text or dialog from a text book
  - Tell your partner what you are planning for the weekend or for after the tandem meeting (if you have the language skills to talk in simple terms about the future)
  - Tell your partner what you did last week (if you have some basic language skills to talk about the past)
  - Prepare a chapter from the text book that you’d like to look at with your partner
- Think about which vocabulary or which structures you might need for such exercises. You could ask your partner for help, but if you think this through yourself, you will activate language skills you already possess. You can then ask your partner about points you are unsure of or were not able to find out yourself.
- Look for and prepare suitable materials

Materials

Visual materials can help your tandem partner understand and support you. They can act as prompts to help you to remember what you wanted to talk about. When your vocabulary is limited, visuals can also help you stay on topic. Visual materials don't need to be prepared in advance – during the tandem session, you can draw pictures to support and explain what you want to say.

Here are some ideas on how to use visual materials:
- Using maps, you can talk about other countries (where they are, what the capital cities are, neighbor countries, and which languages are spoken where). You could also describe your holidays (We went to Spain for a week. We went to X…. . Here it is.).
- Photographs can be used to introduce your family, where you live, or your favorite holiday destination. Talking about your life also allows you to practice talking about places and people.
- Sketches and drawings can help you to describe what your apartment looks like, how you get to work, or where your favorite restaurant is.
**Tables and lists** can be created individually and then discussed together.

For example:
- Both partners draw up their schedule for the following week and then – without showing the other their timetable – try to find a time to meet (for the next tandem meeting or to go to the movies, etc.). Practice the times of day and the days of the week in advance.
- Both partners write questions together (e.g. What’s your favorite food? Do you like chocolate? What time do you normally go to bed? etc.). Each then answers the questions, and the native speaker helps the learner with vocabulary. Then the partners interview each other.
- Each partner imagines 3 fictional (or famous) people and takes notes on when they get up in the morning, when they go to work, when they eat lunch, etc. Then the partners exchange the names and ask each other questions about the people they’ve imagined.

Tandem beginners need to have **realistic expectations** and select tasks they can **realistically achieve**. If you have been learning a language for only a few weeks, you most likely won’t be able to give a 10-minute presentation. Some topics are intrinsically difficult – don’t expect to be able to explain your country’s political situation straight away. However, you should be able to explain some key facts about your country (number of inhabitants, how big it is, the capital city, places of interest, etc.) fairly soon.

The following exercise is realistic and useful in real-life situations. Try to write some simple questions that occur repeatedly in your tandem sessions in your target language, for example:
- How do you say … in …?
- What does … mean?
- What’s the opposite of …?
- How do you pronounce that?
- I have a question.
- I don’t understand.
- Ah, I see.
- Is that correct?
- What’s the difference between … and …?

Knowing these sentences will allow you to communicate more easily in your target language. They are also useful in everyday situations. Start with a small pool of simple sentences and gradually add more questions and common sentences.

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