Integrating E-tandem Mode in the Language Curriculum in the English Major at Technical University of Cotopaxi[1]

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Abstract

The main objective of this qualitative case study was to analyze the feasibility of integrating an e-tandem mode into the language curriculum for the English major at the Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi (UTC). We selected purposeful sampling that permitted us to deliberately choose participants. So, this study was conducted by eleven pre-service teachers and two professors of the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages-English degree program. Semi-structured interviews were administered to professors, and focus groups were conducted with pre-service teachers. Open-ended questions were designed for both techniques. The main findings show that e-tandem mode can be implemented in the curriculum of the English major in two forms: as a component of a subject and as pre-professional practice. Once the legal basis of the Regulation of the Academic Regime of Ecuador was reviewed, we concluded that e-tandem could be included as a component of a subject, respecting the principle of autonomy and giving rewards (scores) when learners participate in sessions. It could also be a pre-professional practice activity in which learners could improve their communicative competence and language knowledge by participating in the e-tandem process as mediators or tutors. It is recommended to use pilot plans in the UTC with the use of e-tandem sessions in both modalities, which could then be evaluated to determine which one produces the best results.

Resumen

El principal objetivo de este estudio de caso cualitativo fue analizar la viabilidad de integrar un modo e-tándem en el currículo de idiomas en Inglés de la Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi (UTC). Seleccionamos un muestreo intencionado que nos permitió elegir deliberadamente a los participantes. Este estudio fue realizado por once profesores en formación y dos profesores de la carrera Pedagogía de las lenguas nacionales y extranjeras-inglés. Se aplicó una entrevista semiestructurada a profesores y grupos focales a profesores en formación. Se diseñaron preguntas abiertas en ambas técnicas. Los principales hallazgos muestran que el e-tándem se puede implementar en el plan de estudios de la carrera de inglés en dos formas: como componente de una materia y como prácticas preprofesionales. Se revisó la base legal del Reglamento del Régimen Académico de Ecuador y concluimos que el e-tándem debe incluirse como un componente de una asignatura respetando el principio de autonomía y otorgando recompensas (puntajes) cuando los alumnos participan en las sesiones. Debe ser también una actividad de práctica pre-profesional en la que los alumnos puedan mejorar su competencia comunicativa y el conocimiento del idioma actuando como mediadores o tutores del proceso e-tándem. Se recomienda aplicar planes piloto en la UTC con la aplicación de las sesiones e-tándem en las dos modalidades, para luego ser sometido a una evaluación y así saber cuál de ellos daría mejores resultados.

Introduction

Tandem learning entails […] two persons with different mother tongues interact and learn each other's native languages in reciprocal cooperation. (Karjalarinen, et al., 2013, p. 166)

Tandem is a person-to-person program where learners share the same physical environment while eTandem Language Learning (eTLL) is an approach that offers such a real purpose for language use by enabling learners to communicate via the Internet. (El-Hariri, 2017, p. 23)

Participants are physically apart, but they are together within a third context--the virtual context. (Telles & Vassallo, 2006, p.196)

E-Tandem (El-Hariri, 2017) or Teletandem (Telles & Vassallo, 2006) is designed to help Foreign Language (FL) learners increase their communication competence, cultural awareness, motivation, and confidence. Its aim is to make mastering the skill easier by putting together a group of different learners for language Exchange (Vassallo & Telles, 2006; El-Hariri, 2017). It is inexpensive because all that is required is having access to the internet and video calling tools or messaging software such as *Google Talk, Skype, Messenger*, emails, text-chats, and so forth (El-Hariri, 2017; Vassallo & Telles, 2006). The interaction can last fifty

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minutes, half for the first language and the other half for the second language (Cziko, 2004). E-Tandem is considered as a complement in formal education, helping to have a positive learning environment, and allowing learners to express their ideas and thoughts without fear or nervousness (Almazova et al., 2020; El-Hariri, 2017).

Cando & Tovar (2021) carried out a study at the Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi (UTC) in which this research was also conducted. Their study focused on implementing a non-institutional integrated e-tandem pilot project. Findings revealed the usefulness of the e-tandem method in language and cultural learning. Some benefits they found in their pilot e-tandem project were improving language, culture, and motivation; on the other hand, the obstacles were focused on schedule, guidance, compatibility with the e-tandem partner, and poor knowledge of the target language. These researchers assert that most of the drawbacks are associated with the mode of e-tandem (institutional non-integrated). Therefore, Cando & Tovar (2021) suggested that in order to have a better academic and administrative organization of the e-tandem sessions, an institutional integrated e-tandem mode should be implemented. It should be incorporated into the language curriculum because it would help professors and pre-service teachers to avoid having different problems which were found in the pilot project. Additionally, since e-tandem would be carried out in the regular classes, it would greatly enhance learners' communicative and cultural competence.

Literature Review

Technology integration into the teaching of English as a foreign language

Learning English requires EFL learners to develop different skills: speaking, writing, listening, reading, and cultural skills. Over time, language teaching has taken different forms, especially in English teaching. Technology has brought a range of new language teaching materials to language classrooms. English teachers can use different resources such as whiteboards, smartphones, blogging, platforms, applications, social media, and websites (Biondo, 2011; Jana & Iveta, 2019; Santhosh & Meenakshi, 2015) to support learners' needs and help them develop their English skills (Husain, 2015; Kurum, 2016; Sheeba & Hanif, 2018; Solak, 2016; Vernier, et al., 2008). Abbasova & Mammadova (2019) declare that "the technological tools are essential parts of integration to the digital world with the help of teachers who can facilitate learners' learning process" (p. 364). Technology has allowed teachers to create an e-learning environment in foreign language contexts. It permits students to be more creative and to learn quickly. As part of e-learning, teachers can employ different resources such as *Verbling, Busuu, Hello Talk, The mixer, Speaky, Hi uTandem, Tandem*, etc. These tools help students to practice the English language and other ones through real interaction (Fadil et al., 2010; Lombardi, 2007; Supriyono, et. al., 2020; Wu & Marek, 2009).

E-tandem in English language learning

E-tandem language learning occurs when two or more people with different mother tongues cooperate and interact with each other and learn the other person's language and culture (Wakisaka, 2008). Before the existence of e-tandem, tandem mode used to be applied in language learning. Tandem began in the 1960s in Germany and other European countries as an alternative and complementary modality to formal learning of foreign languages (Benedetti, 2010; Telles & Vassallo, 2006). It used to be developed face-to-face and between learners who shared the same geographical context. Later on, through technological advancement, two new modes of tandem emerged: teletandem and e-tandem.

Teletandem is a distance and computer-assisted mode of learning that incorporates technological tools for video conferencing in which speakers from different languages learn each other's language in virtual meetings (Biondo, 2011; Cavalari & Aranha, 2019; Telles & Vassallo, 2006). Teletandem helps students to learn a language in a collaborative and autonomous manner employing synchronous tools like text, voice, and webcam image (Cavalari & Aranha, 2019; Telles & Vassallo, 2006).

Likewise, e-tandem is considered a way of virtual exchanges among learners of different languages in order to practice their skills with native speakers (El-Hariri, 2017; Serrato & Padilla Rodriguez, 2020), with emphasis on the use of electronic media such as telephone, chat, Computer-mediated Communication (text, audio, and video, emails, MOOs, PalTalk, Video Conferencing System, etc.) (Cziko, 2004). E-tandem is a useful method that allows FL learners to increase their cultural and language knowledge (Wang-Szilas, et al., 2013). El-Hariri (2017) argues that "e-tandem communication via the internet may be realized in different ways. While written interaction through emails or text-chats was prevailing in the late 1990s, audio-visual telecollaboration through video-conferencing, establishes itself more and more these days" (p. 24).

The role of the different electronic media in the e-tandem interaction is the plus in the evolution of the concept of tandem, teletandem and e-tandem. In this regard, we assume teletandem and e-tandem as similar concepts since both focus on developing telecollaboration among speakers of different countries which can be employed in academic contexts, in order to practice and enhance language and culture skills.

E-tandem mode must be developed based on three key principles which are no mixing languages, reciprocity, and autonomy. The first stands for speaking during each part of the lesson only in the target language. Reciprocity means that each student commits to spending the same amount of time communicating in both languages and showing mutual respect. Autonomy occurs when learners decide what, when, and how much they want to learn (Telles & Vassallo, 2006).

There are three modes of E-tandem: non-institutional, institutional non-integrated, and institutional integrated. According to Cavalari (2018) "non-institutional tandem is carried out by two language learners without any institutional involvement or recognition" (p.419). Institutional non-integrated sessions are conducted as extracurricular activities outside of the institution (Aranha & Cavalari, 2014). The institutional integrated mode demands activities that are embedded in the language curriculum (Cavalari & Aranha, 2019).

Institutional Integrated Teletandem (iiTD)

The institutional integrated teletandem (iiTD) involves mandatory sessions that are embedded in the curriculum of foreign language lessons. So, teletandem interaction happen in class as part of the obligatory tasks in a language subject (Aranha & Cavalari, 2014; Aranha & Cavalari, 2015). According to Ramos & Carvalho (2018) "interactions occur in groups, in laboratories from partner universities, during a schedule previously set by teachers or graduate students who act as mediators of the process, coordinating, organizing, and conducting the sessions" (p. 39). Telles (2015) says that "teachers' pedagogical support may have a relevant impact on how students respond to teletandem sessions" (p. 606). Mediation allows the promotion of foreign language learning and teaching successfully (Aranha and Cavalari, 2014). The sessions are scheduled based on the group and institutions' availability. The mediators must agree on ways activities are organized (Ramos & Carvalho, 2018).

Teletandem integrated into the curriculum requires three relevant components: tutorial, integrating tasks, and providing assessment (Cavalari & Aranha, 2016). The tutorial focuses on communicating with learners about the process of iiTD. According to these authors, it is split into three parts:

1. *Presentation of some theoretical issues that govern iiTD practice: It involves the three principles of teletandem which allow participants to learn collaboratively.*

2. *Information about the tasks and processes involved in the participation (calendar, rules, tasks, assessment). First, learners are informed about the practicalities in iiTD interaction. FL teachers have to create a calendar with the number of interactions and tasks that learners need to complete. Here, they are asked to store iiTD information such as interaction, video/audio files and word files which must be in an e-portfolio.*

3. *Help in selecting a learning goal: FL teachers provide students with a questionnaire with some guiding questions to orient their learning goals. An initial questionnaire permits learners to reflect on what they can or cannot do in the interaction.*

Additionally, teachers can integrate different tasks which students can develop during the e-tandem interactions to promote independent learning (Cavalari & Aranha, 2016). Instructors can select the topics that belong to the course syllabi and create activities to send learners as homework. These activities can be written works (Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016). After each interaction, students can develop different tasks that may be documented in a wiki software or any platform (Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016; Wang-Szilas, et al., 2013). These tasks are useful to enhance their autonomous learning and assist the FL teachers in determining whether pedagogical assistance is required during the iiITD encounters (Cavalari & Aranha, 2016).

The providing assessment component requires three types of assessments: self, peer, and teachers' assessment. In self-assessment learners focus on their learning goals during the interaction. They can use an e-portfolio to track their progress in the learning process. FL teachers can grade students using their self-assessment e-portfolio (Cavalari & Aranha, 2016). In peer-assessment learners must review their partners' oral and written works. Learners do not have to judge such works but give an orientation about what they did well or not so well. This assessment can be done by using tools that permit the exchange of files between two partners. Teachers' assessment also is relevant in an iiTD. This assessment can be done in a summative or formative way.

In addition, criteria coherent with autonomous learning can be established. iiTD requires three main activities. Firstly, teachers explain to students how sessions will be carried out. Secondly, they integrate tasks into the curriculum. Finally, learners' progress is managed through assessments by self, peer, or teachers. The authors emphasize the importance of iiTD in FL classrooms due to the possibility of providing FL learners with a meaningful experience with authentic, autonomous, and collaborative technology-mediated learning (Cavalari & Aranha, 2016).

Implementing e-tandem into the curriculum

E-tandem integration into the curriculum in universities has a positive impact on students learning because it allows them to fulfil academic content/tasks and increase communicative as well as cultural competence. However, the integration should be a gradual process as teachers must monitor the students' development and analyze if the curriculum is designed according to students' needs (Wang-Szilas., et al., 2013). Online Tandem Learning Exchange might be a viable instrument for enhancing the international cooperation between the professors and learners of foreign institutions through its implementation in the foreign language curriculum (Brinckwirth, 2012). The e-tandem mode can be included by considering three dimensions: (a) the role that the new pedagogical tool plays in its learning/teaching process; (b) the learning in Teletandem (c) the teaching, counseling and/or mediation in the Teletandem process (Telles & Vassallo, 2006, p.204).

An e-tandem project into the curriculum of an English language teaching program in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context is fundamental since pre-service teachers can significantly improve their oral competence-a necessary tool to be an effective teacher. Teachers need to have a good level of English to develop their teaching competence. Abbs et al. (2013) states that "the B2 benchmark (CEFR) is the minimum language proficiency level for pre-service and in-service English teachers, assuring students will have teachers who are proficient in the language" (p. 3). On the other hand, Biondo's (2011) study suggests that an e-tandem project is also an opportunity for developing pedagogical competence since pre-service English teachers can act as mediators to help other students prepare a conversation plan to interact with foreign speakers. Being e-tandem integrated requires the students to be guided by a tutor or mediator (Ramos & Carvalho, 2018). Pre-service teachers can assume these roles. In other words, iiTD can be a setting for pre-professional practice, which is an activity that allows pre-service teachers to apply their knowledge and abilities acquired during the learning process in a real educational context (Cedeño Sánchez, & Santos Naranjo, 2017). According to Coleman, (as cited in De la Vega & Arakaki, 2010), pre-professional practice is "a relatively short supervised work experience. It is offered as part of the curriculum and carried out during the academic sequence" (p. 76).

Based on these arguments, the objective of this qualitative study was to analyze the feasibility of integrating e-tandem sessions into the language curriculum in English Major at UTC. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the pre-service teachers' and professors´ opinions about integrating e tandem mode in the English Major curriculum?
2. What is the legal basis of implementing an institutional integrated e-tandem mode in the English Major curriculum at the UTC?
3. What would be the advantages of an institutional integrated e-tandem program at UTC?

Methodology

Design and method

We followed a qualitative research approach to gain insight into the feasibility of integrating e-tandem mode into the curriculum in the English Major at the UTC. The research method selected was the case study, in coherence with the qualitative approach since this allowed us to get a better comprehension of the phenomena, through in-depth exploration and analysis of data collected featuring the participants' opinions and the analysis of the legal basis required for the possible integration of the e-tandem mode into the curriculum.

Sample and site

We applied purposeful homogeneous sampling, selecting participants we considered as "information-rich" (Creswell, 2012). The sampling strategy was to select participants who shared identical characteristics, such as those pre-service teachers who had participated in a pilot study of implementing a non-integrated e-

tandem project at the public university in 2018-2019, and, those who had completed all the E-Tandem interaction that were planned in the piloting. Eleven pre-service English teachers participated: three males and eight females. Two pre-service teachers were in their fifth semester, four in their sixth semester, one in his seventh semester, and four in their eighth semesters. Their English level was between A2 and B1. Their age average was 21,18 years old. In addition, two male and female professors aged 37 and 35 played the role of guide or instructor during the pilot project took part in our study. Their English level was C1 and both of them are EFL teachers from the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages.

Data-gathering strategies

To collect data from the professors, we designed semi-structured interviews applied in zoom meetings that lasted approximately 40 minutes. In the case of pre-service teachers, we conducted two focus group interviews which lasted around 45 minutes. This strategy is advantageous when "interviewees are similar to and cooperative with each other" (Creswell, 2012, p. 218).

Interviews with all the professors and students were conducted in their mother tongue, as we considered language "as critical to understanding the qualitative research interview" (Welch & Piekkari, 2006, p. 418). In addition, following Lee (2001) "the language-of-interview may impose an interpretive lens through which the entire survey interaction is defined" (p. 15). In this regard, Spanish was the language used. It allowed us to gain insider views of the participants. As Spanish speakers ourselves, we acted as translators and tried to be faithful in our translation of the interview data.

Data analysis

We followed a bottom-up approach to data analysis. According to Creswell (2012) "this analysis initially consists of developing a general sense of the data, and then coding descriptions and themes about the central phenomenon" (p. 237). Therefore, the data were prepared and organized into computer files and analyzed manually. Then, the interview data were transcribed and read, with the most representative excerpts from the participants' comments being highlighted. Two experienced coders participated in coding the data. At first, they worked individually with the whole information (interviews and focus group transcriptions), and both agreed to follow the coding process suggested by Creswell (2012): "read through text data; divide the text into segments of information; label the segments of information with codes; reduce overall and redundancy of codes; collapse codes into themes" (p. 244).

During the coding process, coders got together several times to share and discuss their own results and inconsistencies in their data meaning assignment. These meetings helped them to reach consensual interpretation of the data as well as to make decisions of the subsequent codes by refining or merging the existing codes. In this regard, as a product of the coders' individual and mutual analysis, the data was coded into categories and subcategories, avoiding repetitive information. In order to answer the research questions, coders analyzed data in detail and made the same decision to reduce codes in three major categories with their corresponding subcategories, after having eliminated redundancies. Finally, the findings were interpreted by referencing past studies.

To validate the accuracy of the findings, we applied the triangulation technique. We examined each information source: professors' viewpoints, pre-service teachers' opinions, and Academic Regime Regulations, to support each category and subcategory.

Ethical considerations

To obtain participants' access for gathering data, we used informed consent. This document helped participants know the degree of participation that they had in the study and some ethical rules of the investigation. First, we contacted participants by telephone and clarified to them the scope of the research, the objective, and the reasons for inviting them to participate in the study. Professors were told that they were being taken into account because they had been part of the non-integrated e-tandem pilot project and pre-service teachers because they had been an integral part of this interaction. Then, once we had talked to them, we indicated that an informed consent document would be sent to their emails so that they had the possibility to read, fill, sign, and send it back without pressure. In this way, participants agreed to provide us with their information that was going to be used only for academic and investigative purposes, in turn, to maintain their anonymity. Only after we had received their signed informed consent, we involved them in the next step of interviewing them.

Results

Findings of the study provided insights about the feasibility of integrating an e-tandem sessions mode into the language curriculum in English Major at the UTC. Analysis of the responses from professors' interviews and pre-service teachers' focus groups revealed the following categories and subcategories.

Categories	Subcategories
E-tandem mode in the curriculum	As a mandatory subject As an optional subject As pre-professional practice
Legal basis for an institutional integrated e-tandem mode	As a mandatory/optional subject As pre-professional practice
Advantages of an institutional integrated e-tandem mode	Minimize technological problems Have e-tandem sessions in the schedule Monitor students' performance

Table 1: Categories and subcategories

Category A: E-tandem mode in the language curriculum

This section was divided into three subcategories that answer the research question about professors and pre-service teachers' opinions of integrating e-tandem mode in the language curriculum in the English Major at the UTC.

Subcategory A.1: As a mandatory subject

Both professors suggested integrating the E-tandem program into the language curriculum as a mandatory subject. It would have to be compulsory since students would show more interest in participating in sessions due to their need to complete an aspect that is part of their required study program. Professors also recommended employing e-tandem obligatorily because e-tandem embedded in the curriculum would improve students' learning experiences. They said that e-tandem could be part of the curriculum by connecting it as a new aspect in the English subject.

> *Yo recomiendo 100% este programa, pero tiene que ser ya no un programa complementario, sino como un programa inserto en el pensum de estudio, de manera que el estudiante vea primeramente la necesidad y segundo la obligación de cumplir.* [I recommend this program 100%, but it must no longer be a complementary program, but rather as a program inserted in the study curriculum so that the student sees first the need and second the obligation to fulfill it.] (TRT)

> *Hay dos tipos de E-tándem, inmersos en el currículo, y no inmersos. Telles manifiesta que los estudiantes tienen mejores experiencias en programas E-tándem inmersos en el currículo.* [There are two types of E-tandem, embedded in the curriculum, and not embedded. Telles states that students have better experiences in e-tandem programs immersed in the curriculum] (TFC)

> *Pienso que debería estar inmerso en el currículo en el sentido de que esté conectado a las asignaturas de inglés y que sea un aspecto de la asignatura de inglés.* [I think that it should be embedded in the curriculum in the sense that it is connected to the English subjects] (TFC)

Additionally, some pre-service teachers agreed that the e-tandem program should be a mandatory subject because it would help students to lose fear while they speak in a foreign language. They suggested including the e-tandem mode with a low hourly load, so that students could acquire the language significantly in a natural way. In this way, future English teachers would enhance their communicative competence more properly.

> *Pienso que sí se debería implementar como una materia ya que el e-tándem me ha ayudado a perder el miedo de hablar en un idioma extranjero.* [I think that it should be implemented as a subject since e-tandem has helped me to lose the fear of speaking in a foreign language.] (PSTA-63)

> *Igual creo que debe ser implementado y debe ser de manera obligatoria, ya que esto es lo que a los estudiantes les ayudaría significativamente para que aprendan el idioma inglés de una manera natural.* [I also believe that it should be implemented and it should be mandatory, since this is what would significantly help students to learn the English language in a natural way] (PSTA-52)

> *Yo consideraría que debería ser obligatoria desde los inicios pero con poca carga horaria....que nos podamos sentir en confianza…..y mejorar la calidad del docente que sale egresado de la Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi.* [I think that it should be mandatory from the beginning but with little workload perhaps ..... that we would feel confident ... ..and to improve the quality of the teacher who graduates from the Technical University of Cotopaxi.] (PSTB-83)

Subcategory A.2: As an optional subject

Although every professor agreed on e-tandem as an optional subject, some pre-service teachers mentioned that this program should be optional and not be listed as a course. Pre-service teachers concurred that e-tandem could be a complementary method in which they could attend sessions when they feel ready to use it. So, professors could give some extra scores to students who participate in the interaction. This action could motivate them to continue employing this program in their language learning.

> *Creo que podría ser como una materia en donde los estudiantes estén libres de escoger cuando se sientan listos para poder usarla.* [I think it could be like a subject where students are free to choose when they feel ready to use it.] (PST-B82)

> *Pienso que el E-tándem puede ser un método complementario …se debería incentivar a los estudiantes y decirles que si ellos asisten a las sesiones van a tener un punto extra…* [I think that E-tandem can be a complementary method ... students should be encouraged and told that if they attend the sessions, they will have an extra point ...] (PSTA-63)

> *Se debe implementar, pero de manera opcional y se puede utilizar un día a la semana para despertar la motivación en los estudiantes.* [It should be implemented but optionally and can be used one day a week to awaken motivation in students.] (PSTA-63)

> *E- tándem debería ser opcional para que los estudiantes puedan tener su respectivo tiempo porque como ya sabemos hay estudiantes que quizás trabajan ….* [E-tándem should be optional so that students can have their respective time because, as we already know, there are students who may work ...] (PSTB-81)

Subcategory A.3: As a pre-professional practice

Regarding the implementation of the e-tandem as a pre-professional practice, English professors and pre-service English teachers agreed. A professor mentioned that e-tandem as a pre-professional practice would be the best option. In addition, pre-service English teachers said that if the e-tandem justifies some hours of the pre-professional practices, they would participate in it regularly. They stated that the interaction not only improves their communicative skills but also motivates them to enhance their professional proficiency.

Professor's opinion:

> *Si se puede hacer como práctica qué mejor.* [If it can be done as a practice, it would be better] (TFC)

Pre-service teachers' opinions:

> *Yo creo que se debería implementar a las prácticas pre profesionales. Nosotros no estamos aprendiendo el idioma inglés sólo para comunicarnos, sino para enseñar. Por lo tanto, debemos tener un nivel óptimo en el idioma y podemos lograrlo por medio del E-tandem.* [I believe it should be implemented in the pre-professional practice. We do not learn English only to communicate, but also to teach. So, we must have a high level and it is a way that we can acquire it through interactive activities in E-tandem.] (PSTA-51)

> *Sería útil para nuestras prácticas, porque nos ayudaría a desarrollar (…) el speaking.* [It would be useful for our pre-service practices because it would help us to develop our speaking skills.] (PSTA-62)

> *Sí, sería muy beneficioso, ya que esto nos motivaría. Si me dicen te vamos a apoyar con un cierto porcentaje de número de horas de práctica profesional, si deseas asistir a nuestro programa y en E-tándem. Yo con mucho gusto voy a ir, una porque primero quiero seguir desarrollando mis habilidades de speaking y otra porque tengo el incentivo de las horas de práctica sumadas a mi práctica pre profesional.* [Yes, it would be very beneficial, since this would motivate us. If you tell me, we will support you with a certain percentage of the number of hours of professional practice, if you want to attend our program and in E-tandem. I will gladly go because first I want to continue developing my speaking skills and another because I have the incentive of the hours of practice added to my pre-professional practice.] (PSTB-63)

Category B: Legal basis for an institutional integrated e-tandem mode

This section contains two subcategories that respond to the second research question about the legal basis of implementing an institutional integrated e-tandem mode in the language curriculum in English Major at the UTC.

Subcategory B.1: As a mandatory/optional subject

We reviewed the *Reglamento de Régimen Académico*[6] (RRA) (2020) which is a current regulation in Ecuador that controls the substantive functions of higher education institutions (HEI). It involves a set of articles

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[6]Academic Regulatory Regime.

that describe teacher learning organization and the learning activities that help students achieve their goals. It describes the main and mandatory components of the learning process in a subject. Thus, in Title III, Chapter I, it is stipulated that:

La organización del aprendizaje tiene tres componentes básicos: a) aprendizaje en contacto con el docente; b) aprendizaje autónomo; c) aprendizaje práctico experimental [The educational organization has three basic components: a) learning in contact with the teacher; b) autonomous learning; c) practical experiential learning.] (Art. 26)

El aprendizaje en contacto con el docente es el conjunto de actividades individuales o grupales desarrolladas con intervención directa del docente (…) que comprende las clases, conferencias, seminarios, talleres, proyectos en aula presencial o virtual (…). [Learning in contact with the teacher is the set of individual or group activities developed with the direct intervention of the teacher (…) that includes classes, conferences, seminars, workshops, projects in face-to-face or virtual classroom (…).] (Art. 27)

El aprendizaje autónomo es el conjunto de actividades individuales o grupales desarrolladas de forma independiente por el estudiante sin contacto con el personal de apoyo académico. Las actividades planificadas y/o guiadas por el docente se desarrollan en función de su capacidad de iniciativa y de planificación; (…) la motivación y la curiosidad para conocer; la transferencia y contextualización de conocimientos; la reflexión crítica y autoevaluación del propio trabajo, (…). Para su desarrollo, deberán planificarse y evaluarse actividades específicas (…) que establezca la IES (…). [Autonomous learning is the set of individual or group activities developed independently by the student without contact with academic support staff. The activities planned or guided by the teacher are developed according to their capacity for initiative and planning; (...) the motivation and curiosity to know; knowledge transfer and contextualization; critical reflection and self-evaluation of one's own work, (…). For its development, specific activities (…) established by the IES (…) should be planned and evaluated.] (Art. 28)

El aprendizaje práctico-experimental es el conjunto de actividades (individuales y grupales) de aplicación de contenidos conceptuales, procedimentales, técnicos, entre otros, (….) que pueden requerir uso de infraestructura [física o virtual), equipos, instrumentos, y demás material, que serán facilitados por las IES. [Practical-experiential learning is a set of activities (individual and group) for the application of conceptual, procedural, technical content, among others, (… ..) that may require the use of infrastructure [physical or virtual), equipment, instruments, and other material, which will be provided by the HEIs.] (Art. 29)

Subcategory B.2: As a pre-professional practice

The integration of E-tandem mode into the curriculum can be adopted as pre-professional practices since it can contribute to the development of pre-service teachers' English professional knowledge and competences. Also, the pre-professional practice can perform in institutions related to pre-service teachers' profession. The RRA (2020) argues that:

a la aplicación de conocimientos y/o al desarrollo de competencias profesionales Las prácticas preprofesionales y pasantías en las carreras de tercer nivel son actividades de aprendizaje orientadas [pre-professional practice and internships in third-level of the program are learning activities aimed at the application of knowledge and/or the development of professional skills] (Art. 53).

Estas prácticas se realizarán en entornos organizacionales, institucionales, empresariales, comunitarios u otros relacionados al ámbito profesional de la carrera, públicos o privados, nacionales e internacional [These practices will be carried out in organizational, institutional, business, community, or other environments related to the professional field of the field of study, public or private, national or international] (Art. 53)

Category C: Advantages of an institutional integrated e-tandem mode

This last section responds to the research questions about the advantages of implementing an institutional integrated e-tandem mode in the English Major at the UTC. It includes three subcategories: minimize technological problems, have e-tandem sessions in the schedule, and monitor student's performance.

Subcategory C.1: Minimize technological problems

Professors stated that an e-tandem integrated into the language curriculum would help to minimize technological problems in sessions. It means that when this program is part of the regular classes, the educational institutions have to provide the necessary equipment such as laboratory and good internet connection for the development of the interaction.

Teniendo el programa e-tándem integrado como materia se requiere que la universidad disponga de un laboratorio equipado con todo lo necesario y un asistente técnico para el desarrollo de las sesiones. [Having the integrated e-tandem program as a subject, the university is required to have a laboratory equipped with everything necessary and a technical assistant for the development of the sessions.] (TFC)

Se requiere tener unos instrumentos de tecnología muy avanzada en donde la banda o ancho de internet sea aceptable para que no haya interferencias. [It is required to have some very advanced technology instruments where the band or internet width is acceptable so that there is no interference.] (TRT)

Subcategory C.2: Have e-tandem session in the schedule

Moreover, professors argued that an integrated e-tandem mode would allow students to develop the sessions within the class schedule. In this way they would be more committed to achieve their language learning goals. They also said that if the program is complementary, learners do not feel responsibility to attend sessions and it is not beneficial for them.

Como el programa era complementario los estudiantes no tenían tiempo para asistir a las sesiones. Había estudiantes que se apoderaban de dicho programa y lo hacían a conciencia porque tenían el interés de aprender. No obstante, había estudiantes que a veces iban y a veces no. [As the program was complementary, the students did not have time to attend the sessions. There were students who took over this program and did it conscientiously because they had an interest in learning. However, there were students who sometimes went and sometimes didn't.] (TRT)

Un e-tándem integrado permitiría el desarrollo de las interacciones dentro del horario de clases. De esta manera los estudiantes estarían más comprometidos con su aprendizaje. [An integrated e-tandem would allow the development of interaction within the class schedule. In this way the students would be more committed to their learning.] (TFC)

Subcategory C.3: Monitor students' performance

Professors' opinions:

According to the participants' opinions, when the non-integrated e-tandem pilot was carried out at the UTC, the professors did not prepare to pre-service teachers for the interaction that is why they had difficulties during the interaction. They also mentioned that pre-service teachers should be monitored, especially those who are at the A1 level because some of them lack of English knowledge so that they need a specific guide from the professors. In addition, they explained that monitoring comes in planning, the tasks' integration, and identifying the students' difficulties

Cuando se desarrolló el proyecto de e-tándem no integrado se les dijo a los estudiantes que día y hora van a tener la conversación, prepárense, no se hizo ningún acompañamiento al estudiante ni planificación para la interacción. [When the non-integrated e-tandem project was developed, the students were told what day and time they would have the conversation; the teacher told them to be prepared. Teachers did not monitor the students nor plan for the interaction] (TFC)

Algunos estudiantes solían planificar a la misma hora de la presentación, recién estaban intentando que tema voy a hacer, que voy a explicar [Some students used to plan at the same time as the presentation, they were just trying to decide, which topic I am going to do, what I am going to explain] (TRT)

Telles manifiesta que debe haber retroalimentación donde el tutor habla con los estudiantes de su desenvolvimiento durante las interacciones [Telles states that there should be feedback when the tutor talks with the students about their development during the interaction.] (TFC)

El monitoreo no solo se basa en cómo los estudiantes hablan en las interacciones, el acompañamiento viene en la planificación, integración de tareas o identificar las dificultades de los estudiantes para poder ayudarlos a mejorar [Monitoring is not only based on how students speak in the interaction, the monitoring comes in planning, integrating tasks or identifying students' difficulties in order to help them improve]. (TFC)

Con respecto en qué niveles se podría participar, hay estudiantes A1 que han participado, algunos no tienen mucha dificultad, algunos no han podido. Según bibliografía dice que tal vez los estudiantes del A1 sí podrían participar, pero con una guía mucho más específica del docente, entonces al integrar las secciones de E-tandem al currículo ese sería otra cosa que se podría hacer, integrar a los estudiantes del A1 también, pero con mayor monitoreo o tutoría de un docente. [Regarding what levels could participate, there are A1 students who have participated, some do not have much difficulty, some of them have not. According to the bibliography, it says that perhaps A1 students could participate but with a specific guide from the teacher, then when integrating the E-tandem sections into the curriculum, that would be another thing that could be done, integrating A1 students as well but with more monitoring or tutoring of a teacher] (TFC)

Pre-service teachers' opinions:

Recuerdo que fue la primera vez que fui a una sesión de E-tándem, yo fui sin nada de escrito preparado y realmente se me hizo muy difícil porque todo fue hablado y yo no tenía preparado nada. [I remember that it was the first time I went to an E-tandem session, I went in without any written preparation and it really was very difficult because everything was discussed and I had nothing prepared] (PSTA-71)

Discussion

Category A: E-tandem mode in the language curriculum

Subcategory A.1: As a mandatory subject

Professors and pre-service teachers agreed the e-tandem program should be considered as a mandatory subject because of some benefits it represents, some of them concerned to the students' interest in participating in the sessions, help them have new learning experiences, and overcome fear in speaking as well as acquire a language significantly in a natural way. The results are consistent with Chaieberras and Rascón (2018) who state that "compulsory online interactions permit to obtain adequate receptive and productive skills, as well as socio-cultural knowledge of the English language" (p. 159). In addition, Anwer (2019) emphasizes that "obligatory activities allow students to enhance their motivation and improve academic achievement for better results in learning" (p. 167). Moreover, being a compulsory subject, students will have their teacher's pedagogical support, which may have a relevant impact on how students respond to teletandem sessions (Telles, 2015). E-Tandem exchange is effective in the language learning process when integrated into a course syllabus and given adequate institutional support (Cavalari & Aranha, 2019; Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016).

Subcategory A.2: As an optional subject

Some pre-service teachers were in favor of including e-tandem as an optional activity since if this mode is optional, they would attend the sessions without pressure, that is, when they feel prepared to take part of it. In addition, they affirmed that professors can provide rewards (scores) to learners who participate continuously. In this way, students would be more prompted to continue using the program. Litzler (2018) highlights that "it is important to set up activities that students will feel free to do" (p. 14). However, Cando & Tovar's (2021) study affirms that when e-tandem is optional, many learners do not attend the sessions and do not responsibly fulfill all the tasks of the e-tandem process. Students do not consider the enormous value to develop activities when these are optional (Verkade & Lim, 2015). Therefore, Cando & Tovar (2021) recommend that e-tandem should be mandatory, which agrees with what was mentioned by the teachers interviewed.

Subcategory A.3: As a pre-professional practice

Professors and pre-service English teachers concurred that the e-tandem mode should be taken into account as part of the pre-professional practice because doing so justifies some hours from the pre-professional practice and helps pre-service teachers to improve their communicative skills and their professional competence. Thus, the pre-professional practice allows pre-service teachers to develop their skills and professional competence in a real situation (Cedeño Sánchez & Santos Naranjo, 2017). Certainly, a high level of English oral competence is necessary for English teachers, but unfortunately, in EFL context it is difficult to develop because of the lack of interactional opportunities. However, thanks to E-tandem, pre-service teachers can develop their communicative competence since it offers them the opportunity to have a learning process in a real-time context (Benedetti, 2010). Griggio and Rózsavölgyi (2016) state that "one of the most effective ways of improving L2 communication skills is through enabling students to engage directly with native speakers" (p. 171). Thus, this program helps them to acquire new lexicon, and enhance their written and oral skills (Griggio & Rózsavölgyi, 2016). Moreover, the idea of receiving credits or scores when participating in E-tandem is ratified. Recognizing their effort can increase their motivation to responsibly fulfill all the tasks of the e-tandem process: the tutorial lesson, the interaction and the final evaluation that can be summative or formative (Cavalari & Aranha, 2016).

Category B: Legal basis for an institutional integrated e-tandem mode

Subcategory B.1: As a mandatory/optional subject

According to the RRA, there are three mandatory components, which must be considered a part of the students' evaluation in a subject: teacher-contact learning, autonomous learning, and practical experiential learning. As these components are compulsory, they must be planned by professors. In this regard, the first and third components are not completely suitable for the conception of e-tandem learning. In contrast, the autonomous work can be considered as an e-tandem experience of a curriculum integrated mode, since it involves activities developed independently by the student without contact or guide of tutors, but previously planned and supported by teachers considering the students curiosity, self-motivation, self-reflection and self-assessment (Cavalari & Aranha, 2016; Serrato & Padilla Rodriguez, 2020; Wakisaka, 2008). Therefore, the teachers' pedagogical support in e-tandem sessions can be focused in the three relevant components of

this interaction: the tutorial role when explaining students about the whole process of the interaction; designing integrating tasks according to their students' interest and motivations, and organizing different assessments to demonstrate their students' progress (Cavalari & Aranha, 2016). E-tandem also can promote students' autonomous and action-oriented learning (Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016). In this aspect, this organization would respect the principle of autonomy when permitting students define their objectives, time, and duration of the sessions, how they want to be evaluated, and they would thus manage their own learning (Luz, 2009, cited in Nogueira, 2012, p. 35) in agreement with their teachers. As Noriega (2012) mentions, "e-tandem seeks autonomy but not but not in isolation but in interaction, in collaborative work." (p. 36). In the higher education context in Ecuador, as has been indicated according to the existing regulations, autonomous work which is considered a mandatory component of any subject, can be the ideal space for e-tandem interaction in UTC, specifically. It can be included in any of the subjects that teach the English language, respecting the student's autonomy but without losing the teacher's guidance.

Subcategory B.2: As a pre-professional practice

When referring to knowledge, the language learning achievement level required in Ecuador for pre-service and in-service English teachers is B2 (Abbs et al., 2013). This means they have to be able to "interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party" (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001, p. 24). In this regard, the e-tandem interaction provides an opportunity for pre-service teachers to apply their English language knowledge in a real context, improving their communicative competence through interaction with native speakers.

On the other hand, a basic professional competence for pre-service teachers is pedagogical; the e-tandem experience could be the opportunity for UTC pre-service teachers, toward the end of the study program, to develop this competence, by assuming the role of mediator or tutor in an e-tandem interaction with their low-level partners. This role could help pre-service teachers participate actively in a teaching experience, making a link between practice and theory. In this sense, they could organize the learning process, establish pedagogical objectives, and pay attention to the techniques and procedures used during their partners' e-tandem interaction, having the opportunity to gain confidence and explore their pedagogical practice (Biondo, 2011). According to Biondo "E-tandem provides the opportunity to explore pedagogical practices on different levels: in practical terms (paying more attention to techniques and procedures), and in reflective terms (exploring decisions and actions pedagogically)" (p. 154)

In addition, the academic regulations establish that the pre-professional practices can be developed in different scenarios, in national or international contexts; it implies that this mode of virtual interaction can be the perfect opportunity for pre-service teachers to interact with foreign partners in an international cooperative work. This mode of learning is in harmony with one of the challenges proposed by the UTC in its Strategic Plan of Institutional Development [PEDI] (Plan estratégico de desarrollo institucional 2021-2025, 2021), i.e., to achieve internationalization through the integration of the institution into an international context, permitting teachers and students to have contact with foreign universities to accomplish an increase in the students' academic efficacy. Internationalization is considered by the UTC to be an important non-economic resource to prepare students to face the challenges of globalization.

Category C: Advantages of an institutional integrated e-tandem mode

Subcategory C.1: Minimize technological problems

Professors concurred that an institutional integrated e-tandem mode would help to reduce technological issues because if the sessions were carried out institutionally, the educational institutions would provide enough equipment (internet connection, laboratories, and technical support) to the development of the interactions. Ramos & Carvalho (2018) emphasized that an e-tandem integrated in the curriculum necessarily would require laboratories that have an internet connection and enough equipment in good condition to carry out the online interaction. In this way, pre-service teachers could use more technological resources for video conferencing, such as *Skype, Zoom,* e-mail, video, and audio with the pertinent technical support provided by the instructors/mediators during the interactions (Biondo, 2011; Telles, 2015). Cando & Tovar's (2021) work suggested an infrastructure with "technological equipment to train the users and provide technical support will contribute to achieving the required academic goals" (p. 6). Besides, the Ley Orgánica de Educación Superior [Organic Law of Higher Education] (2015) states that one of the rights of students is "to have access to the appropriate means and resources for their higher education" (Art. 5, Lit.c).

Subcategory C.2: Have e-tandem session in the schedule

Participants accepted that integrating e-tandem would permit that session to be developed in the class schedule since the study carried out by Cando and Tovar (2021) which is non-institutional integrating, showed that students did not attend the interaction because it was not in the class schedule. So, they did not feel the responsibility to attend the e-tandem session with regularity. Therefore, Cando & Tovar's (2021) pilot project showed that many students did not have enough time to attend the e-tandem sessions because the program was not integrated into the regular classes and the schedules of both universities did not match. So, students did not feel the obligation to participate. Therefore, e-tandem integrated into the curriculum allows teachers/mediators to coordinate, organize, and conduct sessions based on the groups' and institutions' availability (Ramos & Carvalho, 2018, p. 39). The mediators have to agree on how the activities might be organized. These activities can be conducted whether or not in the schedule of regular classes. So, it depends on the agreement of the mediators (Ramos & Carvalho, 2018). Cavalari & Aranha (2016) affirm that "in iiTD participants are expected to negotiate their schedules, establish their own learning goals and strategies, assess their progress, and help their partner achieve their objectives" (p. 328).

Subcategory C.3: Monitor students' performance

The non-integrated e-tandem is a program that is not developed in the educational environment. Learners are not monitored by a professor, so they do not plan their conversation or they sometimes try to find a topic to speak about at the moment of the interaction. The first day of preservice teachers in the non-integrated e-tandem pilot program was difficult because they did not have prior planning about any topic. It happened because they did not have a prior guide or tutor who reviewed their task before and during the conversation. In contrast, integrated e-tándem is developed into an educational setting. It is supported by instructors or mediators who help to develop a strategy to use in the e-tandem interaction (Almazova et al., 2020; Cavalari & Aranha, 2016). Such mediation promotes foreign language learning and teaching successfully (Aranha and Cavalari, 2014). Hence, beginning learners need a specific tutor to aid in improving their conversation plan and abilities. To achieve that, teachers have to integrate tasks such as writing texts (in the foreign language), revising texts (in the native language), and writing reflexive diaries. The guide is in charge of introducing the iiTTD practice, communicating about the activity and procedures in iiTTD participation, and attending to setting a learning goal (Cavalari & Aranha, 2016). Therefore, Telles (2015) states that "teachers` pedagogical support may have a relevant impact on how students respond to teletandem sessions'' (p. 606). In Pomino & Gil-Salom's (2016) study, the instructors did prior planning. They chose topics for their students and integrated the project into the course syllabi. So that all tandem assignments were incorporated into the course syllabus. The sessions were scheduled based on the groups' and institutions' availability. The mediators had to agree on how the activities might be organized (Ramos & Carvalho, 2018). Likewise, professors commented that e-tandem could be implemented from the A1 level. However, they recommend that the students must be monitored by a specific professor who guides them in the conversation planning, helps to improve the weaknesses with the language, and motivates them. Nevertheless, Cando and Tovar (2021) mention that ¨The level required must be A2 or higher because they can manage the conversation¨ (p. 8).

Conclusion

Pre-service teachers and professors concur that the e-tandem program could be implemented in the language curriculum of the English language area of studies at the Technical University of Cotopaxi. Pomino & Gil-Salom (2016) emphasize that "e-Tandem exchange is effective in the language learning process when it is incorporated into a course syllabus" (p. 673). Therefore, this mode could be integrated as a part of a subject in the autonomous learning component, which is a compulsory activity in the university curriculum in Ecuador. It would allow learners to feel the need and responsibility to practice the language and promote independent learning. Compulsory activities could lead to better performance, so that students could take advantage of the benefits of this program. Anwer (2019) affirms that "obligatory activities allow students to enhance their motivation and improve academic achievement for better results in learning" (p. 167). Based on pre-service teachers' opinions, if e-tandem were mandatory, professors could give them rewards (scores) when they participate in sessions, helping them increase their motivation to responsibly fulfill all the tasks of the e-tandem process. It would be possible only if this mode were evaluated as an autonomous learning component. On the other hand, some pre-service teachers stated that the e-tandem mode could be optional. It could be because of their lack of responsibility that many students favor optional activities.

Additionally, e-tandem sessions could be part of pre-professional practice as they would permit the development of linguistic competence which is necessary for all English teachers. In some cases, pre-service

teachers claimed that their participation could be rewarded with credits or hours in their teaching practice. Pre-professional practice would enable them to foster their abilities and professional competence in a real-world setting (Cedeo & Santos, 2017). An e-tandem experience seems to be an opportunity for developing pedagogical competence and collaborative learning since pre-service teachers could act as mediators to guide other students in the development of interactions (Biondo, 2011).

Based on the analysis of the Ecuatorian Ley Orgánica de Educación Superior (2015), on one hand, despite the pre-service teachers and professors' opinions about the inclusion of e-tandem as a subject, optional or compulsory, the regulations indicate that one feasible way for this mode of interaction to be included in the curriculum is as part of the learning organization of a subject, that is, as an autonomous learning component. It would be monitored with the guidance and support of the professor. who would decide, in mutual agreement with the students, the best form of evaluation to be applied (Art. 28).

On the other hand, e-tandem could also be part of the curriculum as a pre-professional practice activity. It is an alternative that could be implemented for those students who voluntarily wish to improve their communicative competence and knowledge of the language. At the same time, the opportunity would be given to students of the final two levels (7th and 8th) who could participate as mediators or tutors in the process, being responsible for the organization of these types of interaction that would allow them to apply their pedagogical skills. It is recommended to apply pilot plans in the UTC with the application of the e-tandem sessions in the two modalities, to then be subjected to an evaluation and thus know which of them would give better results (Art. 53).

Some of the advantages of an institutionally integrated e-tandem mode would be: minimize technological problems, have e-tandem sessions in the schedule, and monitor students' performance. Technological issues could be reduced if e-tandem mode were integrated into the regular language lessons. An e-tandem integration necessarily requires laboratories that provide internet connections and enough equipment in good condition to carry out the online interaction (Ramos & Carvalho, 2018). An integrated e-tandem would allow students to develop sessions connected with the schedule of regular classes. The sessions would be scheduled based on the group and institutional availability (Ramos & Carvalho, 2018). In e-tandem mode, pre-service teachers would have a mediator or tutor who would guide them during the interaction.

These results are subject to certain limitations: the tutor's lack of knowledge with respect to the legal basis and the fact that opinions came from a limited sample size. More research could be done on implementing and evaluating institutionally integrated e-tandem modes.

On the other hand, some challenges that could be faced in the integration of e-tandem into the curriculum are: the structuring this mode into the curriculum of the curriculum, professors' complete understanding of the e-tandem scope, and professors and pre-service teachers' training on the e-tandem mode requirements.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. Do you think the E-tandem program helps pre-service teachers learn the English language? Why?
2. Do you consider that the E-tandem program could help pre-service teachers improve their knowledge or pedagogical practices? How?
3. Do you think the E-tandem program helps pre-service teachers feel motivated to improve their English language skills?
4. How relevant is it that pre-service teachers have cultural knowledge during English Language development?
5. What do you think about implementing the E-tandem program in the curriculum of the English degree program of the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages major?
6. Do you consider that the E-tandem program could be useful to implement as an academic part of the English subject?
7. Do you consider that the E-tandem program could be useful to implement in the process of pre-professional practice?

Focus Group Guide

1. Do you think that the E-tandem program contributes to English Language Learning?
2. Do you think that the E-tandem program could be an effective tool for teaching and learning English?
3. Do you think that interacting with native speakers helps pre-service teachers feel motivated to improve their language skills? Why?
4. Do you consider that pre-service teachers should have cultural knowledge in the teaching-learning process? Why?
5. Do you think the E-tandem program could contribute not only to the pre-service teachers´ learning of the English language but also in the development of their cultural knowledge? How?
6. Do you think that the E-tandem program could be implemented in the curriculum of the English degree program of the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages major?
7. If your answer is Yes, Do you think that the E-tandem program should be mandatory or optional?