

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed language learning practices, particularly by expanding opportunities for communication beyond traditional classroom settings. In today's globalized world, technology-mediated communication enables individuals from different cultural backgrounds to interact instantly and continuously across geographical boundaries (Lifintsev & Wellbrock, 2019). As a result, language learning is increasingly viewed not only as the acquisition of linguistic knowledge but also as a process of developing intercultural understanding through authentic interaction (Karlik, 2023). One form of technology-enhanced language learning that has gained considerable attention is virtual language exchange. Digital platforms facilitate direct interaction between language learners and native speakers, allowing them to engage in real-time communication through text, audio, and video features (Nushi & Khazaei, 2020). Among these platforms, the Tandem application functions as a peer-to-peer language exchange tool designed to promote mutual learning, where users alternately assume the roles of language learner and language supporter (Salma, 2020). The widespread adoption of Tandem, with more than 30 million downloads globally, indicates its growing role as one of the most prominent digital platforms for informal language learning and intercultural interaction (Chandra & Palvia, 2021).

Virtual exchanges conducted through applications such as Tandem have been increasingly recognized for their potential to support the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) alongside language proficiency (Jackson, 2020). Intercultural communicative competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, which is grounded in attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Tümen Akyıldız et al., 2021). Empirical studies indicate that participation in technology-mediated intercultural communication can enhance learners' cultural awareness, empathy, and appreciation of diverse perspectives (Perry & Redman, 2023). These competencies are considered essential in contemporary multilingual and multicultural societies, where cross-cultural interaction has become a routine aspect of academic, professional, and social communication.

Previous studies have extensively examined the use of the Tandem application as a digital platform for language learning, particularly in relation to linguistic development. Empirical research has demonstrated that Tandem provides opportunities for authentic, real-time interaction with native speakers, which contributes to improvements in learners' speaking fluency, vocabulary use, and pronunciation accuracy (Claudia Oktaviani, 2024; Stošić & Guillén-Gámez, 2024). These studies emphasize Tandem's effectiveness in exposing learners to natural language use beyond formal classroom instruction, thereby supporting communicative language competence through informal and self-directed practice (Muslimawati, 2022).



In addition to linguistic outcomes, several studies have acknowledged that tandem language learning involves intercultural elements. Research by (Tardieu & Horgues, 2020a) indicates that tandem exchanges encourage reflective learning, as learners compare their own cultural assumptions with those of their language partners during interaction. This reflective process has been associated with the development of openness, respect for cultural diversity, and awareness of cultural differences, which are fundamental components of intercultural communicative competence (Rastgoo, 2024). Other studies also suggest that technology-mediated exchanges may support broader educational goals related to global citizenship and cultural literacy (Fang & Elyas, 2020; Pais & Costa, 2020).

However, despite these findings, existing research on the Tandem application remains predominantly focused on linguistic performance and general learner perceptions. Studies tend to prioritize measurable language outcomes, such as vocabulary acquisition, grammatical accuracy, and speaking confidence, while providing limited exploration of learners' intercultural communication experiences in depth (Claudia Oktaviani, 2024). As a result, intercultural dimensions of tandem interaction such as emotional engagement, cultural empathy, negotiation of meaning, and strategies for managing cultural differences are often treated as secondary or implicit rather than as central objects of analysis (De Doctorado & Chen, 2024).

Moreover, previous studies have reported that learners' experiences on Tandem vary considerably depending on individual factors, including language proficiency, cultural background, and motivation (Tardieu & Horgues, 2020b). While some learners benefit from intercultural dialogue and demonstrate increased cultural awareness, others encounter challenges such as cultural misunderstandings, stereotyping, or discomfort when engaging with unfamiliar cultural norms (Ahmad & Ebele, 2024). Nevertheless, there is still limited qualitative research that systematically investigates how learners experience these challenges and enabling factors within intercultural communication on the Tandem platform. This gap indicates the need for further empirical investigation into the intercultural communication processes facilitated by Tandem, beyond its linguistic outcomes, in order to better understand its role in supporting global competence development

Considering the growing focus on digital literacy and international cooperation in language education, examining the Tandem App's role in facilitating intercultural communication is both topical and pertinent. Integrating innovative technology with pedagogical practices can enable educators to develop more engaging, inclusive, and culturally responsive learning environments (Chima Abimbola Eden et al., 2024). This study aims to fill the gap in the literature by exploring how the Tandem App influences users' cross-cultural communication skills. It specifically looks at how learners feel about their multicultural experiences on the platform and how these interactions help them become better communicators from different cultures. The results should give teachers, curriculum designers, and app developers who want to use language exchange platforms to promote global learning some useful information.

## 1.2 Statement of the problem

Based on the research background above, the problem statement are:

1. How the context on Tandem App based on theory?
2. What challenging and enabling factors do learners encounter when engaging in intercultural communication through the Tandem App?
3. How do language learners perceive the role of the Tandem App in facilitating their intercultural communication experiences?

## 1.3 Purpose of the Study

Based on the background of the study above, the purpose of the study are:

1. To analyze the context of the Tandem App in supporting intercultural communication based on intercultural communicative competence theory.
2. To identify the challenging and enabling factors that affect learners' engagement in culturally responsive and globally collaborative communication through the Tandem App.
3. To explore learners perceptions of the role of the Tandem App in supporting their intercultural communication experiences.

## 1.4 Significance of the study

This study is expected to offer both theoretical and practical benefits in the field of language education, as explained in the following sections:

### 1. Theoretical Benefits

This study is expected to contribute theoretically to the field of language education, particularly in the areas of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and technology-enhanced language learning (TELL). By examining

learners' intercultural communication experiences through the Tandem application, this study provides empirical insights into how intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills are developed in technology-mediated language exchange contexts. The findings are expected to enrich existing literature by extending the discussion beyond linguistic outcomes and highlighting the intercultural communication processes facilitated by digital platforms. Furthermore, this study may serve as a reference for future research focusing on global collaboration, virtual exchange, and intercultural learning in informal digital environments.

## 2. Practical Benefits

Practically, this study provides insights into how technology-mediated language exchange platforms can support intercultural communication in language learning. The findings highlight how learners engage in authentic cross-cultural interaction through the Tandem application, which may encourage language learners to become more aware of cultural differences and to develop more reflective and adaptive communication strategies. For language teachers, this study offers practical considerations for integrating digital platforms into language instruction to foster intercultural awareness alongside linguistic development. The results may also inform educational institutions in designing more inclusive and globally oriented language learning practices by incorporating virtual intercultural interaction as a complementary learning resource. In addition, the findings can serve as practical references for curriculum developers and application designers in

enhancing the intercultural features of language exchange platforms to better support global communication and collaboration.

### **1.5 Scope and Limitation**

This study focuses on the use of the Tandem App in developing intercultural communication skills among English language learners. The research is limited to users actively engaging in language exchange through the App :

#### **1. Scope of the Study**

This study focuses on the use of the Tandem Application as a digital platform for language learners to engage in global collaboration and develop cross-cultural communication skills. The research investigates how learners interact with native speakers from different cultural backgrounds through text, audio, and video chats provided by Tandem. The study aims to explore learners' perceptions and experiences of intercultural communication and how such experiences contribute to their intercultural awareness and competence. Data is gathered from a selected number of active Tandem users who have engaged in language exchange interactions on the App.

#### **2. Limitation of the Study**

This study has several limitations. First, it is limited to the Tandem platform, and the findings may not be applicable to other language exchange tools or classroom-based interactions. Second, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be affected by personal bias, selective memory, or social desirability. Third, the research does not aim to measure language proficiency outcomes such as vocabulary acquisition or grammar accuracy, but rather focuses on intercultural communication aspects. Additionally, variations in participants'

language levels, cultural backgrounds, motivation, and frequency of App usage may influence the consistency and generalizability of the results.

### 1.6 Definition of Key Term

In this study, several key terms are defined to clarify the scope and focus of the research.

**Intercultural Communicative Competence**

**Competence (ICC) :** (ICC) is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds, based on intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Byram, 1997a).

**The Tandem Application :** A peer-to-peer language learning platform that connects users worldwide to practice languages with native speakers via text, audio, and video interactions (Adnan Zafar & Maria Curie, 2020).

**Intercultural Communication :** Intercultural communication (IC) can be defined as communication where cultural and linguistic differences are perceived as relevant to the interaction by the participants or researchers involved (Baker, 2024).