To cite this Article / Käytä viittauksessa alkuperäistä lähdettä:

Annala, H. & Abruquah, E. (2021) KiVAKO UniTandem: Online Peer Language Learning. Ilon kautta – laadusta tinkimättä! : Ammattikorkeakoulujen kielten ja viestinnän opetuksen päivät 7.– 8.10.2021 SAMKissa. 21-25.

URL: https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe2021121560648

# KiVAKO UniTandem: Online Peer Language Learning

Henri Annala & Emmanuel Abruquah, Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulu

*The authors are experienced tandem learning enthusiasts who enjoy seeing students engage in developing their language skills in authentic, cross-cultural environments.*

The need for providing students with the opportunity to learn foreign languages and intercultural communication skills cannot be overemphasised, as globalisation and the increased mobility of people around the world contribute significantly to the skills required in the 21st century workplace (Soffel, 2016). A good command of English is nowadays a standard requirement, and often it is just not enough. Simultaneously, decreased government funding for education has resulted in fewer language courses on offer at universities and universities of applied sciences. There is also a strong regional disparity in what and how many languages higher education students can study (Pyykkö, 2017). KiVAKO (the acronym stands for "Kielivarannon vahvistaminen korkeakouluissa" ("Strengthening the Language Base at Higher Education Institutions")) project was established to tackle these problems by improving the foreign language selection taught at Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences, thus providing students with more learning paths.

In practice, the project focused on creating online courses for less commonly studied languages. Commissioned and funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, KiVAKO project included 120 language professionals from 28 universities and universities of applied sciences in Finland. It started in 2018 and will run until the end of 2021. Through the collaborative efforts of Finnish higher education institutions, courses were developed for 11 languages: German, Russian, Spanish, French, Chinese, Estonian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, and sign language. In addition, a peer learning framework called UniTandem was developed to allow students to tap into a resource that has not been utilised much in language teaching and learning: international students.

The number of international students (both exchange and degree students) in Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences has been steadily increasing, and in the future, it will most likely continue to increase. These students speak a staggering variety of languages, and at the same time they would often want to learn Finnish or some other language. The idea of UniTandem was to bring the students interested in developing their language and culture skills together, utilising tandem pedagogy developed in Germany in the 1960s (Wolff 2018).
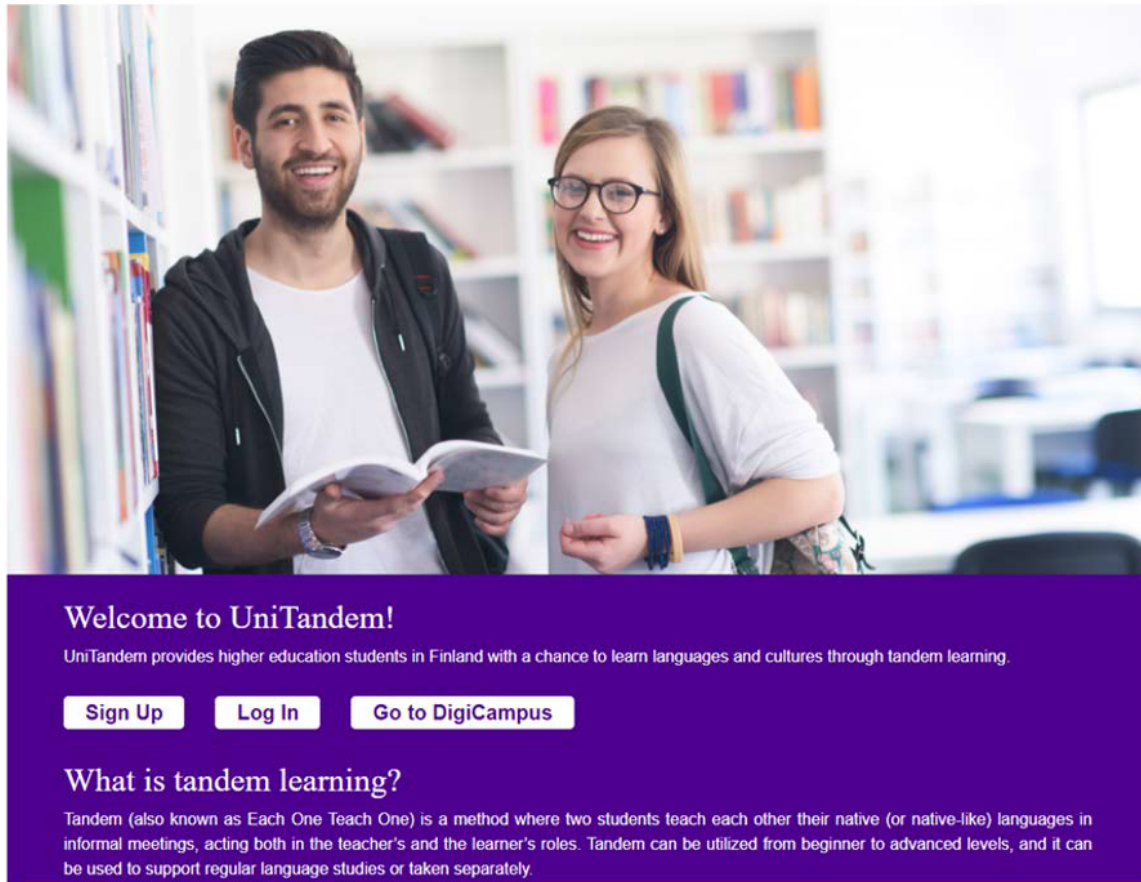
UniTandem utilises two platforms: the UniTandem app (http://unitandem.fi), which is technically a progressive web application (PWA) developed by five student teams from Tampere University, and the DigiCampus Moodle (http://digicampus.fi), which includes all the instructions and learning tasks called "triggers". First, the student must find a suitable partner whose language preferences (the language s/he wants to study and the language s/he can teach) match with another student (e.g., student A wants to learn Chinese and can teach Swedish, and student B wants to learn Swedish and can teach Chinese, so they can form a pair) (see picture 1). The UniTandem app matches students based on their language preferences and offers for example a feature to filter users based on location in case the students would want to meet up also physically, and a possibility to chat and exchange contact information (see picture 2).

## Languages available in UniTandem

Q Search                                                                    ×

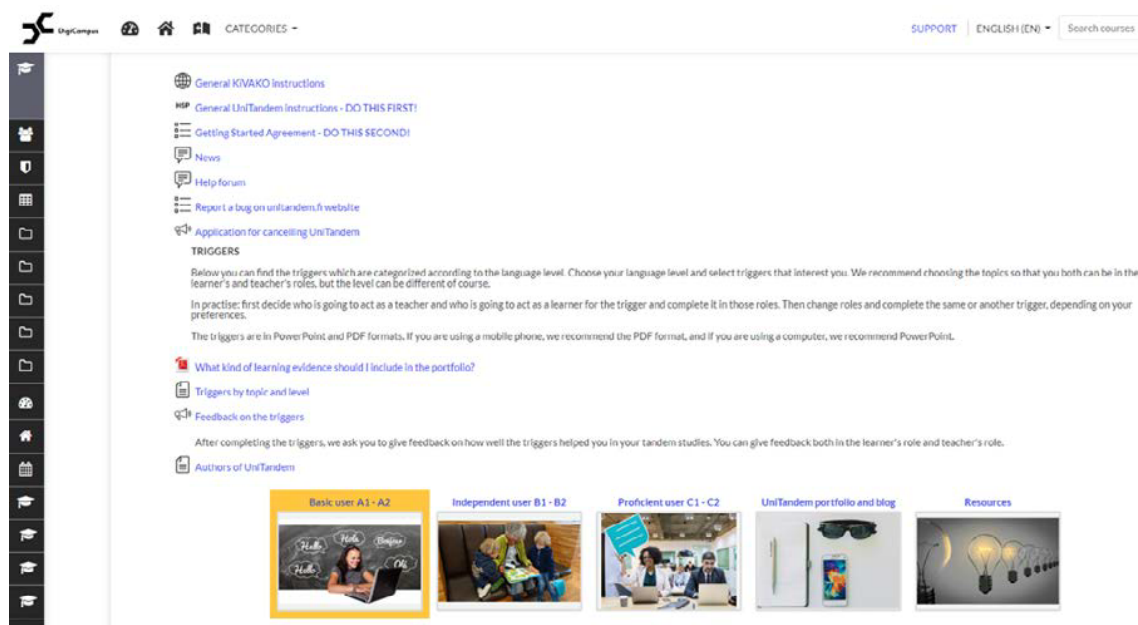| Language | Students ↓ | Teachers |
|---|---|---|
| Finnish | 137 | 124 |
| Spanish (Castillian) | 57 | 14 |
| French | 47 | 7 |
| Swedish | 47 | 22 |
| German | 46 | 18 |
| English | 40 | 90 |
| Russian | 39 | 34 |
| Japanese | 31 | 2 |
| Chinese, Mandarin | 21 | 26 |
| Italian | 21 | 11 |

10 rows ▼    |<    <    1-10 of 54    >    >|

Picture 1: Languages available in UniTandem (as of 9/2021)

Picture 2: UniTandem app landing page

When the student has found a study partner, they choose learning tasks or "triggers" from the DigiCampus course area based on their interests (see picture 3). They are awarded with credits based on the number of triggers they complete (three triggers in the learner's role equals one credit). The triggers cover various topics and on various skill levels (see figure 1). As of 9/2021, there are over 80 different triggers with different skill level combinations available, for a student to complete 1-5 ECTS credits through UniTandem.
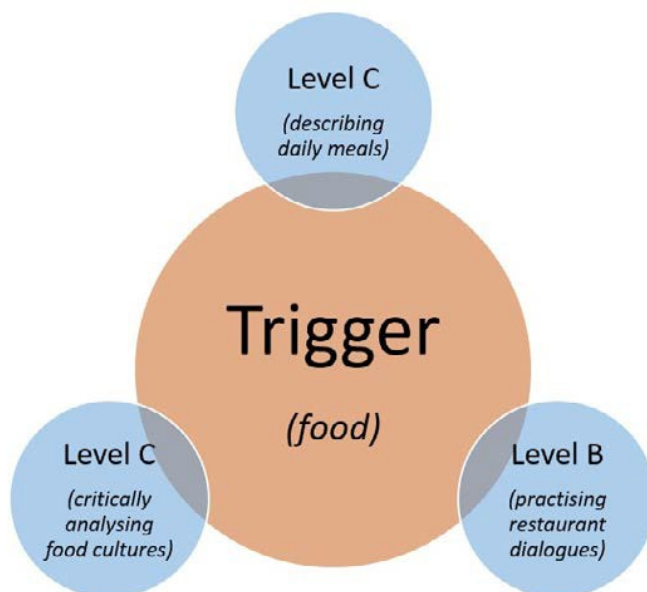
Picture 3: UniTandem DigiCampus area



Figure 1: Example of a trigger for different skill levels

When the pair has completed the triggers, they wish to complete, they compile a portfolio based on the trigger outputs (e.g., text, images, voice, video) and submit it through Digi-Campus for the course coordinator to check. In addition, they have a blog where they post some reflective posts while they are completing the triggers.

The course framework has been piloted already for several times, but it was officially launched this autumn (2021). The feedback and experiences received so far have been great, and there is a firm belief that this form of learning is both needed and welcomed by both the students and the teachers. One quite natural future possibility would be to extend UniTandem to different countries, but it remains to be seen when and if it can be realised.

## Sources

Pyykkö, Riitta. 2017. Multilingualism into a Strength. A Report of the Status and Levels of Language Competences in Finland. Ministry of Education and Culture. Read on 29.9.2021. Available at http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-263-535-8

Soffel, Jenny. 2020. Ten 21st-century skills every student needs. World Economic Forum. Global Agenda. Read on 24.9.2021. Available at https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/03/21st-century-skills-future-jobs-students/

Wolff, Jürgen. 2018. History of TANDEM. Read on 29.9.2021. Available at https://tandemcity.info/history-tandem/