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From Initial Engagement to Selective Use: Interaction and Adjustment among Chinese Learners on Tandem

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Abstract

Tandem is often used by learners who want more chances to practise Chinese outside class. However, access to Chinese-speaking partners does not always lead to stable or useful practice. This study examines how beginner and lower-proficiency learners of Chinese reported using Tandem, what difficulties they met during exchange, and how they later described changes in their use of the platform. It used a descriptive survey with follow-up interviews. The data came from questionnaire responses by 53 adult learners of Chinese and interviews with six participants. The findings show that many learners began with clear goals and some preparation, but their strategy use was uneven. Immediate interactional strategies, including correction requests, translation tools, note-taking, and using multiple modes to express meaning, appeared easier to sustain than more organised planning. Repeated difficulties also emerged, including fear of making mistakes, difficulty understanding partners, topic breakdown, pronunciation or listening problems, and unbalanced interaction. Across the questionnaire and interview data, later use was more often reduced, selective, or redirected than fully discontinued. This pattern did not simply indicate a loss of motivation. It showed learners reassessing Tandem's learning value when open exchange failed to provide enough correction, topic control, or continuity for focused Chinese practice. Because this was an exploratory study with a small, self-selected sample from one platform, and because it relied on learner-reported data, the findings should be read as perceived patterns of use rather than direct evidence of interactional processes. Within this boundary, the study mainly applies to beginner and lower-proficiency learners. It suggests that open peer exchange can support extra exposure, but these learners still need correction, manageable topics, sentence-level support, and more continuous interaction to turn access into useful practice.

Keywords

Tandem, beginner Chinese learners, open peer exchange, selective use, participation adjustment

从积极尝试到选择性使用：Tandem 平台中文学习者的互动与调整

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摘要

Tandem 为中文学习者提供了课堂外接触母语者和进行真实交流的机会，但这种开放式同伴交流并不必然转化为稳定、有效的语言练习。本文关注初级及较低水平中文学习者在 Tandem 平台上的使用经验，重点分析他们如何使用学习策略、在互动中遇到哪些困难，以及这些经验如何影响后续参与方式。研究采用描述性问卷和后续访谈相结合的方法，数据来自 53 名成人中文学习者的问卷回答和 6 名学习者的访谈资料。研究发现，许多学习者最初并非随意使用 Tandem，而是带着较明确的学习目标进入交流，并会提前准备词语、句子或话题。然而，这种计划性参与在实际互动中并不稳定。相比提前规划、设定小目标和协商交流方式，请求纠正、使用翻译工具、记录新词和借助多模态资源等即时性策略更容易被持续使用。与此同时，学习者在交流中反复遇到害怕出错、难以理解对方、话题难以延续、发音或听力困难以及互动不平衡等问题。进一步分析显示，学习者后续使用 Tandem 的变化并不主要表现为完全退出，而更多体现为减少使用、选择性使用或转向其他学习工具和学习场景。这种变化不能简单理解为学习动机下降，而是学习者在反复经历反馈不足、话题控制有限和互动连续性较弱之后，对平台学习价值进行重新判断的结果。研究认为，开放式同伴交流可以扩展初级及较低水平中文学习者的接触机会，但若缺少纠正反馈、可控话题、句子层面支持和稳定互动，其对早期中文学习的支持作用仍然有限。由于本研究样本较小，且来自单一平台，并主要依赖学习者自我报告资料，本文结论应被理解为学习者感知和回顾性经验的呈现，而不是对 Tandem 实际互动过程的直接观察。

关键词

Tandem, 初级中文学习者, 开放式同伴交流, 互动困难, 参与调整

Introduction

Mobile-assisted language learning platforms have become a common part of out-of-class language learning. Virtual exchange and other forms of digitally mediated interaction are also used more often by language learners who want contact beyond formal lessons (Li et al., 2023; O'Dowd, 2021). This is also relevant to Chinese learning. When learners have limited access to Chinese-speaking communities, platforms such as Tandem can offer extra chances for interaction and exposure outside class (Jiang & Li, 2018; F. Li et al., 2022).

However, access to Chinese-speaking partners does not automatically lead to sustained and useful practice. Learners may begin with clear goals, but they still need feedback, manageable topics, and enough continuity. When replies are irregular, feedback is weak, or conversations

move away from their goals, learners may reduce their use, use the platform more selectively, or move part of their learning to other tools and settings (Hwang et al., 2024; O'Dowd, 2021; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008; Yin & Fathi, 2025).

This issue needs closer attention in Chinese learning. Research on digital exchange has grown quickly, but much of it still focuses on English or discusses virtual exchange in broad terms rather than Chinese learning itself (Guo & Xu, 2023; O'Dowd, 2021). Lan and Yu's (2023) review of telecollaboration in Chinese as a second language shows that this field is developing. It also points out several areas that still need more work, including partner matching, programme rationale, teacher preparation, and design limitations. As a result, less is known about how learners experience open peer exchange when they practise Chinese on platforms such as Tandem.

This gap matters because lower-proficiency learners often need stronger support during interaction. In Chinese learning contexts, learners may need help with vocabulary choice, sentence building, pronunciation, listening, character input, and culturally situated expressions. Guo and Xu (2023), for example, show that CFL learners in virtual exchange often rely on translanguaging as part of meaning-making. Satar et al. (2024) make a similar point, showing that low-proficiency learners may use translingual and transmodal practices when target-language resources alone are not enough. Open peer exchange may therefore create useful opportunities for Chinese learners, but it may also show a gap between what learners want and what the exchange can actually provide, especially at earlier stages.

Another issue is what learners do to make participation possible. From a self-regulated learning perspective, planning can help learners enter interaction with clearer goals. Learners may prepare topics, list useful words, or ask for feedback before the exchange begins (Yu, 2023). However, these strategies do not work by themselves. Their value depends on the conditions in which learners use them, including platform structure, partner support, and whether participation feels manageable and worth the effort (Guo & Lee, 2023; Hsieh et al., 2022). In open exchange settings, even careful planning may weaken when partners reply slowly, feedback remains limited, or the conversation moves away from the learner's original purpose (Cappellini, 2016; O'Dowd, 2021; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008).

The platform also shapes learner experience. Language exchange platforms can create space for authentic communication, but they do not guarantee balanced participation or steady support. Previous studies have shown that online exchange may involve mismatched goals, limited reciprocity, and interactional asymmetry. These problems can appear when learners and partners differ in expectations, proficiency, feedback practices, or control over topics (O'Dowd, 2021; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). Research in Chinese telecollaboration also shows that outcomes depend heavily on task design, partner configuration, and interactional organisation, not only on access to communication (Luo & Gui, 2021; Luo & Yang, 2022).

This distinction can be understood through an ecological view of affordances. A learning environment does not support learning simply because it provides possible contacts or resources. An affordance becomes meaningful when learners can notice it, use it, and connect it with their own learning needs (van Lier, 2004). Tandem may offer communicative affordances by giving learners access to Chinese-speaking partners, but these affordances do not automatically become pedagogically usable support. For beginner and lower-proficiency Chinese learners, open exchange becomes useful only when it provides feedback, manageable topics, sentence-level help, and enough continuity for focused practice.

In Chinese exchange settings, learner experience is therefore shaped not only by willingness to participate. It also depends on whether learners can turn communicative access into usable learning support during interaction.

Motivation is also part of this process, but it should not be treated as fixed. It changes as learners compare what they hoped for with what they actually experience during use (Norton, 2013; Ushioda, 2011). Recent work on Chinese learners using Tandem and HelloTalk points in the same direction. Yin and Fathi (2025) show that engagement in mobile exchange is shaped by changing motivational conditions, not by stable interest alone. When learners repeatedly meet weak feedback, topic drift, or unstable partner responses, they may become less willing to stay active, even if they still want to learn Chinese. Some may then move part of their effort to other tools or learning spaces that offer clearer structure, faster response, or more controllable support (Hsieh et al., 2022; Yin & Fathi, 2025).

Earlier research points to a common condition for sustained use: learners are more likely to continue open exchange when interaction provides usable support. What remains less clear is how beginner and lower-proficiency learners of Chinese connect their strategy use, interactional difficulties, and later changes in platform use. Existing studies have examined digital exchange, learner strategies, and motivational change, but there is still limited Chinese-specific evidence on what happens when learners begin with clear practice goals and later encounter uneven feedback, topic drift, or weak continuity on open platforms such as Tandem (Guo & Lee, 2023; Guo & Xu, 2023; Lan & Yu, 2023; O'Dowd, 2021; Yin & Fathi, 2025).

This study addresses this issue through a descriptive survey and follow-up interviews. It examines learners' reported strategies, interactional difficulties, and later changes in Tandem use. The focus is not only whether learners continued using the platform, but how they judged its value when continuity, topic control, and language support were weak. For beginner and lower-proficiency Chinese learners, access to speakers is only the starting point. Open peer exchange becomes useful when it fits the support they need for early-stage communication.

Based on this focus, the study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What strategies do learners report using when learning Chinese on Tandem?
- (2) What reported interactional and communication challenges do they describe on the platform?
- (3) How do learners describe later changes in their use of Tandem, and what challenges do they connect with those changes?

Methods

Research design

This study used a descriptive survey with follow-up interviews. The survey was used to map broad patterns in learners' strategy use, communication difficulty, and later changes in Tandem use. The interviews were used to add detail and help explain how learners understood these experiences in their own words (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

This design fitted the purpose of the study. Structured survey items captured common aspects of Tandem use, such as preparation before chatting, requests for correction, use of translation tools, and reported communication challenges. However, some experiences could not be fully captured through fixed-response items alone. These included frustration, reduced expectations, selective continuation, and the decision to rely on other tools or learning settings. The survey therefore provided a broad descriptive picture, while the interviews helped explain the meanings behind these patterns.

The quantitative analysis was descriptive because the study aimed to identify reported patterns of use rather than test statistical relationships. The interview data were then used to add context, explanation, and qualification to the survey findings. The study therefore focuses on learner accounts rather than directly observed interaction on Tandem.

Participants and data collection

The study used convenience sampling. Survey respondents were recruited through an existing Tandem network, open invitations in ongoing chats, language forums, and social media. The final dataset included 53 valid questionnaire responses and six follow-up interviews.

Participants had to meet three conditions. They had to be adult learners of Chinese, have used Tandem within the last month, and have completed at least one text or voice exchange on the platform. Minors and native or heritage Chinese speakers were excluded. Because the sample was self-selected from one platform, the findings should be treated as exploratory.

The survey respondents came from different national backgrounds. During data cleaning, nationality labels were standardised because participants used different naming formats. Most respondents learned Chinese outside Chinese-speaking environments. The sample also leaned toward beginner and lower self-rated proficiency levels. Because there were only a small number of higher-level learners, the study does not report formal comparisons by proficiency level or HSK group. Background information, including age, gender, learning history, and self-rated proficiency, was used to describe the sample rather than to support subgroup testing. The sample was strongly weighted toward beginner learners, with only a small number of intermediate or advanced respondents. Formal comparison across proficiency groups was therefore not appropriate. For this reason, the paper mainly reflects beginner and lower-proficiency Tandem use rather than the full range of Chinese learners on the platform.

Interview participants were selected from the survey group for follow-up explanation. The aim was not to mirror the full sample, but to include different patterns of use. Selection considered self-rated level, frequency of Tandem use, strategy use, perceived usefulness of the platform, and changes in participation over time. The final interview group included learners who remained relatively active and learners who later described weaker, more selective, or reduced use. It also included different learning preferences and expectations for Chinese practice on Tandem. The paper uses pseudonyms, P1 to P6, throughout. Appendix 2 provides fuller profiles of the six participants.

Data collection took place from March to May 2025. The questionnaire was distributed first, followed by online interviews. All participants read an information sheet and gave consent before taking part.

Instruments

The questionnaire included 38 items in seven sections: (1) background and Chinese proficiency, (2) initial reasons for using Tandem, (3) strategy use, (4) partner interaction and communication challenges, (5) frequency of use and change over time, and (6) perceived progress, platform evaluation, and desired features, (7) open-ended reflections.

The questionnaire was designed as a descriptive mapping tool. It was not designed as a psychometric scale measuring one latent construct. For this reason, the paper reports item-level patterns linked to the three research questions rather than composite scores.

The strategy-use items covered preparation, correction requests, translation tools, use of multiple modes to express meaning, note-taking, small goal-setting, and negotiation of exchange conditions. These items addressed RQ1. Items on communication barriers and partner interaction addressed RQ2. Items on frequency of use, perceived usefulness, and later changes in participation addressed RQ3.

The questionnaire was adapted to the context of Chinese learning on Tandem. Its design drew on earlier studies of learning strategies, online exchange, and digital language learning, but the wording and structure were revised to fit the present study and its platform focus. Because the study aimed to capture learner experience across several areas, the questionnaire was used to support descriptive mapping rather than construct validation.

Two Chinese language teachers reviewed the draft questionnaire to improve clarity and fit with the study context. Three Chinese learners then completed a pilot version before the main survey was distributed. Their feedback led to minor changes in wording and item clarity, especially for items about platform behaviour and learner strategy use. Appendix 1 provides the full questionnaire.

The interview guide covered the same broad areas as the questionnaire but allowed participants to explain their experiences in more detail. It included prompts about initial expectations, strategy use, partner interaction, frustration, reduced participation, and views on other tools. This structure made it possible to return to patterns found in the questionnaire while also leaving space for issues raised by the participants. Each interview lasted about 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with permission.

Data analysis

The quantitative analysis was descriptive and guided by the research questions. Five-point items were analysed separately rather than combined into a composite measure, because the questionnaire captured several aspects of learner experience rather than one underlying construct. When needed, full response distributions were kept to avoid overstating small differences between neighbouring response categories. Results are mainly reported as descriptive item-level patterns linked to the three research questions.

Inferential statistics were not used because the study was exploratory and the dataset was not designed for hypothesis testing. The sample was small, self-selected, and unevenly distributed across proficiency groups. The questionnaire was also used for descriptive mapping rather than scale validation. For these reasons, subgroup comparisons would risk overstating differences that the data could not support.

Multi-select items were recoded into separate binary variables, and percentages were calculated using valid responses. Missing data were limited and handled through pairwise deletion. A numeric proxy for weekly frequency of use was created only for visualisation and summary. Quantitative analysis was conducted in R 4.3.2, and figures were generated in jamovi 2.5.

The interview data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. The first author first read the transcripts several times and developed initial codes around repeated learner-reported experiences, including preparation, communication difficulty, partner responsiveness, reduced expectations, selective continuation, and movement toward other learning tools or spaces. Analytic memos were written during coding to compare cases, record emerging interpretations, and link developing ideas to the three research questions.

The codes were then grouped into broader themes related to planning, exchange difficulty, and later participation adjustment. Theme development was flexible. The first author moved between coded extracts and full transcripts to check whether the themes captured both repeated patterns and important differences across participants. Cases that did not fit the main pattern were also considered, so that learner experience would not be presented as more uniform than it was.

The two datasets were brought together during interpretation rather than through formal statistical linking. The questionnaire data identified broad descriptive patterns across the sample. The interview data extended, narrowed, and explained those patterns in participants' own terms. The analysis focused on where the two sources pointed in the same direction and where the interview accounts added depth or clearer limits to the survey findings.

Ethics

This study followed ethical guidelines for minimal-risk research with adult participants in the social sciences. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The questionnaire was anonymous. All identifying information was removed during transcription and reporting. The paper uses pseudonyms, P1 to P6, and does not include personal details.

Participation was voluntary. Participants were told that they could withdraw without negative consequences. Audio files, transcripts, and questionnaire data were stored on encrypted drives that only the researcher could access. The data were used only for research purposes.

Findings

Initial strategy use and early patterns of participation

Many respondents did not approach Tandem as a purely casual tool at the beginning. They reported clear learning aims and some preparation. In the questionnaire, over half said they prepared before chatting at least sometimes. The interviews showed a similar pattern. Several participants said they prepared sentences, vocabulary, or topics before interaction, especially when they first started using the platform. Some also tried to keep a simple routine. P3 explained:

I had some simple plans, like preparing a few Chinese sentences in advance and checking some words or phrases. I hoped that each exchange would lead to a little progress, even if the conversation was short.

A similar expectation appeared in P5's account, although her focus was more on voice-based practice. She explained:

I wanted to find a Chinese native speaker who could slowly practise Chinese with me through voice, even very basic things like greetings, self-introduction, and everyday expressions.

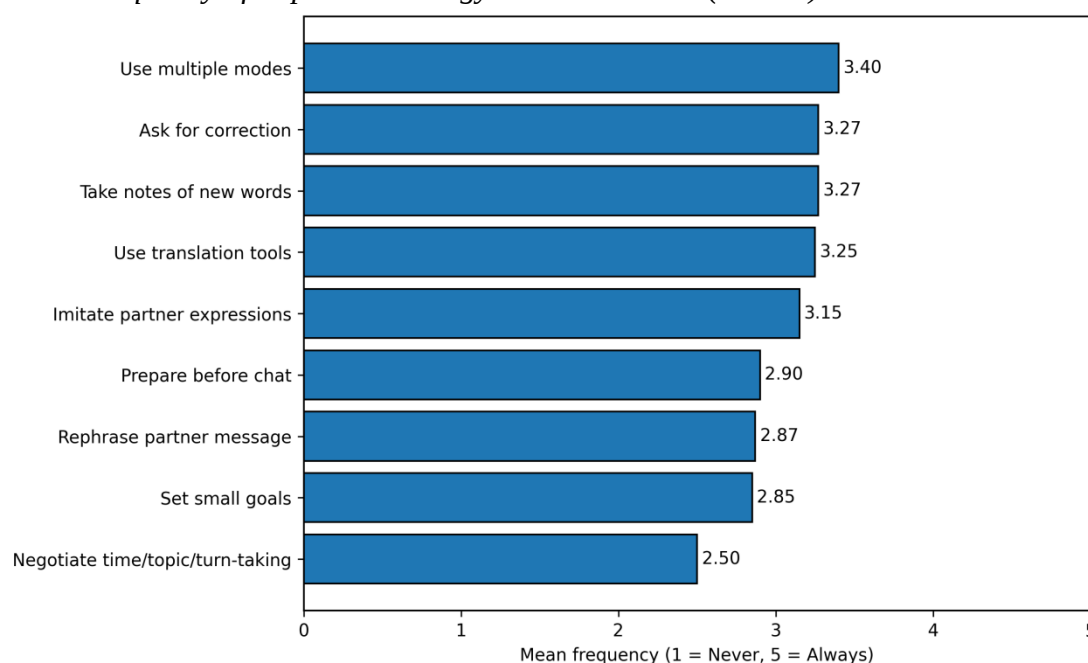
These accounts suggest that Tandem was not initially treated as a space for general chatting. For these learners, the value of exchange depended on whether it could support manageable practice in basic Chinese.

At the same time, strategy use differed across types. Figure 1 shows that the item on using multiple modes to express oneself received the highest mean score (mean = 3.40). This should be interpreted cautiously, because the item captured reported use of multiple modes rather than the quality or learning effect of such use. In this study, multimodal use is therefore better

understood as an immediate way of keeping interaction going when expression became difficult. Asking for correction (mean = 3.27), taking notes of new words (mean = 3.27), and using translation tools (mean = 3.25) were also relatively common. By contrast, negotiating how to manage the exchange (mean = 2.50), setting small goals (mean = 2.85), and preparing before chatting (mean = 2.90) were less common.

Figure 1

Mean Frequency of Reported Strategy Use on Tandem (N = 53)



A similar difference appeared in the metacognitive items. After-chat reflection (mean = 3.69) and adjusting strategy after difficulty (mean = 3.63) were both higher than planning what to say in advance (mean = 2.83). This suggests that learners more often reported responding to problems after they appeared than planning the exchange in advance.

The interviews also showed why some planned strategies were hard to continue. Some participants said that they did not maintain more organised routines, such as advance preparation or small goal-setting. P6 explained:

I once wanted to take notes and set small goals after every chat, but because my time was so fragmented, and I tend to use language more intuitively, those strategy-based practices didn't continue.

This difficulty was not limited to P6. P2 also wanted to prepare sentences before chatting, but she could not keep doing so. She did not set small goals or review vocabulary regularly because the sessions were short and never became a fixed habit.

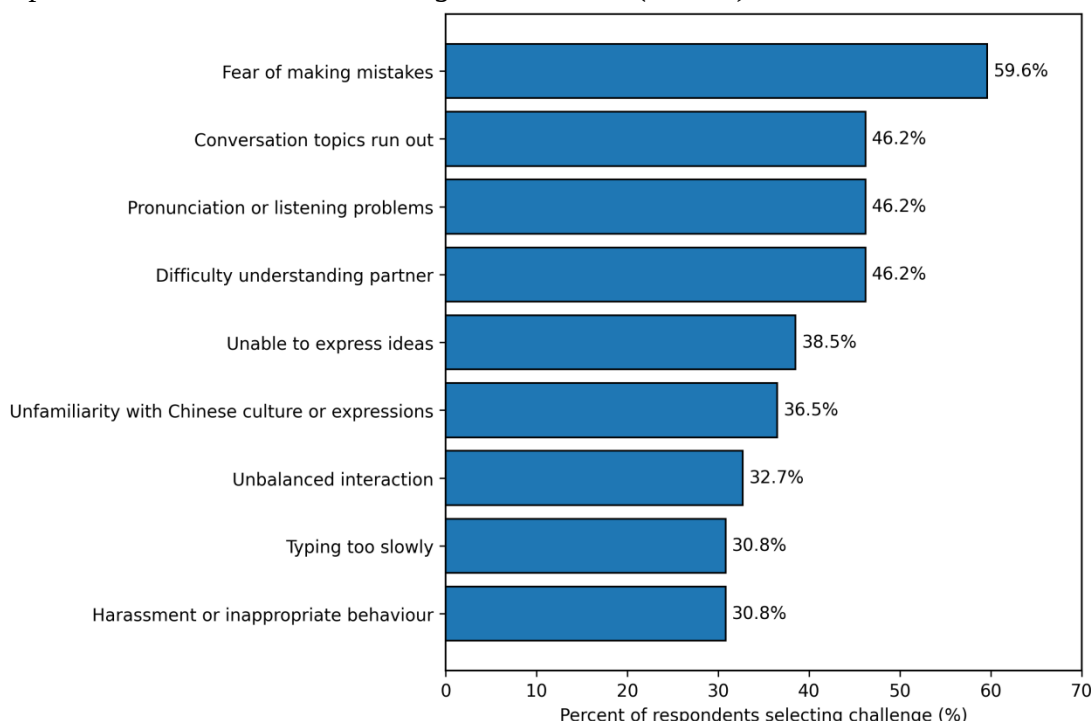
By comparison, translation, correction requests, and multimodal expression were more often described as practices learners could use during the exchange itself. These practices did not require a stable partner or a long-term routine in the same way. The data therefore point to an uneven pattern of strategy use. Learners had clear intentions, but the strategies they sustained most often were those that could help them deal with immediate problems during interaction. These early patterns also need to be read alongside the communication difficulties reported by learners, which are discussed in the next section.

Learners' communication and interactional challenges on Tandem

Communication and interactional difficulties appeared across the dataset. Figure 2 shows that fear of making mistakes was the most commonly selected difficulty (59.6%). Difficulty understanding partners (46.2%), conversation topics running out (46.2%), and pronunciation or listening problems (46.2%) followed at the same level. Other difficulties included difficulty expressing ideas (38.5%), unfamiliarity with Chinese culture or expressions (36.5%), unbalanced interaction (32.7%), typing too slowly (30.8%), and harassment or inappropriate behaviour (30.8%).

Figure 2.

Reported Communication Challenges on Tandem (N = 53)



In the interview data, these problems were often described together rather than as separate issues. Fear of making mistakes was sometimes linked with difficulty expressing ideas. Some learners said they switched back to English when they could not keep the conversation going in Chinese. Difficulty understanding partners also took different forms. Some participants linked it to unfamiliar cultural references, unclear expressions, or impatience from the other side. P2 explained:

Many times I did not understand what the other person meant, not because of the language itself, but because it involved Chinese cultural background. That made me feel a strong sense of distance.

Several difficulties involved the structure of the exchange itself. Participants described unbalanced interaction, topic breakdown, and slow typing when they talked about exchanges that were hard to continue. The percentage for harassment or inappropriate behaviour also deserves attention. Although it was not the most frequently selected category, 30.8% of respondents reported this as a challenge. In the interviews, P1 recalled that after only a few messages, the other person sent harassing content. This made the exchange feel unsafe and led the participant to consider deleting the app. P2 also described an uncomfortable exchange involving suggestive comments, and P3 reported inappropriate or disrespectful behaviour.

These accounts suggest that safety is part of whether open peer exchange feels usable. When learners feel unsafe or embarrassed, they may become less willing to continue the exchange, start new conversations, or take risks in Chinese. This point is especially relevant for lower-proficiency learners, who already face difficulty with expression, listening, and confidence. At the same time, the finding should be interpreted cautiously. The questionnaire did not ask participants to specify the type, frequency, or severity of such behaviour. It is therefore treated as an important safety-related issue for platform design and future research, rather than as a full account of harassment on Tandem.

Corrective feedback was another important issue in learner accounts. Figure 1 shows that asking for correction was one of the more common strategies. The questionnaire, however, did not directly measure how often correction was actually received in Tandem exchanges. Even so, the interviews show that correction mattered to several learners, especially those who wanted more help with grammar, sentence formation, or pronunciation. P6 said:

Sometimes I had something in mind, but I couldn't say it, especially when the grammar was more complex or when I lacked vocabulary. If the other person didn't wait for me or just changed the topic, I felt uncomfortable and didn't want to continue speaking.

P2's account shows that correction was part of her initial expectation, not only a strategy used after problems appeared. She hoped to find a Chinese partner who was willing to teach her, practise pronunciation and listening through voice exchange, and correct her pronunciation. This shows that some learners expected Tandem to provide more than exposure. They wanted feedback that could help them improve specific parts of their Chinese.

The interview accounts also gave more detail about what “difficulty” meant in Chinese exchanges. Participants connected communication problems with specific aspects of beginner Chinese use, including vocabulary choice, sentence formation, spoken-message understanding, pronunciation, and cultural references. Topic fit also appeared repeatedly in learner accounts. Many learners wanted practical Chinese practice, such as daily expressions, basic sentence patterns, or guided conversation. The exchange did not always stay close to those aims. Only 20.8% said they often or always negotiated time, topic, or turn-taking, while 49.1% said they seldom or never did so. P3 described this directly:

I wanted to practise daily expression and basic communication, but many people wanted to talk about more complex topics, or they were not willing to use Chinese at all. That really affected my willingness to continue.

P5's question, “am I here to learn Chinese, or just to listen to other people speak English?”, captures the point at which exchange began to lose its pedagogical value. The problem was not only that English appeared in the conversation. It was that the learner's original goal, basic Chinese practice, was displaced by an interactional rhythm she could not control.

Delayed or missing replies also appeared in interviews and open-ended responses. This point should be interpreted cautiously because it was not included as a direct questionnaire item in Figure 2. In this study, it is therefore treated as a qualitative extension rather than a quantified challenge category. P1 described this instability more concretely. At first, some people replied to her messages, but later she often received no response. Some conversations stopped for several days, and many partners only chatted once or twice before disappearing. As a result, she often had to change partners and start again.

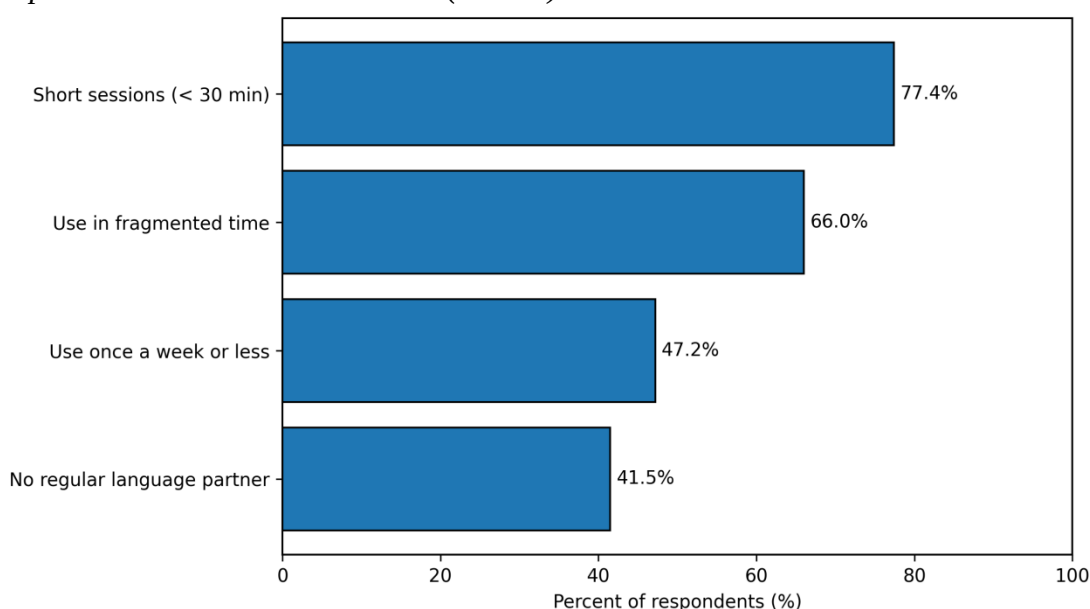
The questionnaire also shows that learners responded to these problems in different immediate ways. Many relied on English or their native language (79.2%). Others changed the topic (45.3%), stopped the conversation (30.2%), or used emojis and pictures (28.3%). Asking the partner for help was also reported (28.3%), but it was less common than shifting to another language. These responses suggest that learners often managed difficulty in practical ways, but these immediate responses did not always keep the exchange focused on Chinese practice.

These difficulties did not appear as isolated problems. They clustered around several recurring conditions of exchange: limited feedback, unstable topic control, weak continuity, and in some cases concerns about interpersonal safety. This pattern helps explain why Tandem could be useful in some moments but difficult to sustain as a regular space for focused Chinese practice.

Later changes in participation and platform use

Before turning to later changes, it is useful to note that Tandem use was not intensive for many respondents. Weekly use was often low, with 47.2% reporting use once a week or less. Many also used the platform in fragmented time (66.0%), and exchange sessions were often short, with 77.4% lasting less than 30 minutes. In addition, 41.5% reported that they did not have a regular language partner. These patterns are summarised in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Reported Use Patterns on Tandem (N = 53)



Most respondents also reported clear reasons for using Tandem at the beginning. The most frequently selected reasons were personal interest (79.2%), planning to visit China (56.6%), and communicating with family or friends (43.4%). Exam-related goals and work-related purposes were each selected by 20.8% of respondents.

The interviews add detail to these early motives. Several participants described Tandem as a place for real communication, more natural expression, and contact with Chinese speakers outside formal study. At the same time, they also said that this kind of use was not always easy to maintain over time.

When participants described later changes, they did not usually describe complete withdrawal from Tandem. More often, they described lower, narrower, or redirected use. Some said they prepared less, expected less correction, or became less active in starting conversations. P2 described this change clearly:

At first I wanted to prepare some sentences before practising, but I could not keep doing it, and I never really set small goals. I also rarely reviewed vocabulary, because after chatting I would just forget. The time was too short, and I never formed a fixed habit.

Several learners also described a more selective form of continued use. They did not leave the platform completely, but used it only when they had time, when a familiar partner replied, or when they wanted lighter exposure rather than focused practice. Others said they had become more cautious after repeated disappointment or negative experiences. As P5 put it:

If I have a fixed partner and we talk two or three times a week, I can keep going. But when someone suddenly stops replying, I usually don't ask again. I just move on.

This selective pattern also appeared in accounts of very low-frequency use. P3 still used Tandem occasionally, but no longer treated it as a stable space for regular Chinese practice. The platform remained useful for light exposure or occasional contact, but it did not provide enough structure for the kind of steady practice the learner had first expected.

Some participants also said that they had shifted part of their effort to other tools or learning spaces, including grammar support, AI-based tools, tutoring, classroom study, or video-based input. P6, the only intermediate learner in the interview group, described a similar redirection. She still wanted to improve her Chinese, but she relied more on classroom tasks and an existing language partner because Tandem did not feel as efficient as she had expected. She also felt that the platform lacked goal-based matching for more advanced Chinese practice.

Across the questionnaire and interview data, later use was more often described as reduced, selective, or redirected rather than as complete exit from the platform. This pattern does not mean that learners simply lost interest in Chinese. Instead, it shows that they adjusted their participation when Tandem did not consistently provide correction, topic control, stable partners, or clear learning value. For many learners, Tandem became one resource among others, rather than the main space for Chinese practice.

Discussion

Planned participation under uneven conditions

Many learners in this study did not enter Tandem without goals. Across the questionnaire and interview data, they described clear aims, some preparation, and a desire to keep exchanges close to their learning needs. This finding is consistent with earlier work showing that planning can help learners enter interaction with clearer direction and stronger initial control (Ellis, 2018; Gurzynski-Weiss et al., 2017; Skehan, 2016).

The uneven strategy pattern, however, complicates a simple self-regulated learning explanation. Learners did not lack awareness or intention. Many knew that preparation, correction, note-taking, and reflection could support their Chinese learning. What weakened regulation was the unstable environment in which these strategies had to be used. Planning, goal-setting, and exchange management require some continuity across interactions, but Tandem exchanges were often short, delayed, and dependent on partner availability.

This helps explain why strategies used during interaction were easier to sustain than strategies that required organisation before or across exchanges. Translation tools, correction requests, note-taking, and multimodal expression could be used when a problem appeared. By contrast, setting small goals, preparing in advance, or negotiating exchange conditions required a more predictable interactional setting. When partners disappeared, topics shifted, or feedback remained weak, these proactive strategies lost part of their practical value.

In this sense, self-regulation was not only an individual capacity. It was also shaped by whether the platform environment made regulation practicable. Learners could prepare topics, request correction, or set goals, but they could not fully regulate partner response, topic direction, feedback quality, or continuity. Open exchange therefore placed limits on what individual planning could achieve.

For lower-proficiency Chinese learners, this point is especially important. At this stage, learners often need support with sentence building, feedback, topic control, and meaning negotiation. When these conditions are weak, planning does not disappear, but it becomes fragile. The issue is therefore not simply whether learners have strategies. It is whether open peer exchange gives those strategies enough room to work.

Pedagogical mismatch in open peer exchange

The findings point to a pedagogical mismatch between communicative access and pedagogically usable support. Tandem offered learners contact with Chinese-speaking partners, but the platform's open exchange structure did not reliably organise that contact into feedback, topic control, or sustained language practice. This distinction matters for lower-proficiency learners. In CALL terms, the platform created an affordance for communication, but that affordance did not always become an affordance for learning. Access created the possibility of interaction; support determined whether that interaction could be converted into Chinese development.

This mismatch was not located in one single problem. Correction, topic control, and continuity weakened together. When correction was absent, learners lost the instructional value they expected from exchange. When topics moved toward English use, complex discussion, or partner-led interests, Chinese practice became harder to sustain. When replies were delayed or discontinued, even prepared learners had to restart the exchange again and again. These problems did more than interrupt individual conversations. They exposed a deeper limitation of open peer exchange: it can provide contact without ensuring the interactional conditions that make contact useful for early-stage language development.

This mismatch was more consequential because many participants were beginner or lower-proficiency learners. At earlier stages of Chinese learning, even short exchanges can involve several demands at the same time: vocabulary choice, word order, pronunciation, tone perception, character input, and culturally situated expressions. Learners may therefore need more than exposure to native speakers. They need usable support that fits early Chinese learning, such as manageable topics, short model sentences, simple correction, slower voice interaction, pinyin or pronunciation help, and chances to reuse basic sentence patterns. They also need partners who can keep the exchange close to their level and goals.

Without these forms of support, open peer exchange may remain useful for contact and exposure, but less reliable for focused language development. Research in digital Chinese

learning and telecollaboration points in the same direction (Guo & Xu, 2023; Muñoz-Basols et al., 2023; Satar et al., 2024; Sippel & Martin, 2024).

This helps explain why interactional asymmetry mattered in the present study. Some partners controlled the topic, replied irregularly, offered little correction, or shifted the exchange away from Chinese practice. Learners then had fewer resources to keep the interaction aligned with their goals. They could switch to English, change the topic, stop the conversation, or use emojis and pictures. These responses helped them manage local difficulty, but they did not always support sustained Chinese-focused participation.

For this reason, Tandem should not be read simply as ineffective. Open exchange still had value, but its interactional logic did not always fit what lower-proficiency learners needed from Chinese practice. It worked better as a flexible space for exposure and occasional interaction than as a stable environment for guided sentence-level development.

Because the study does not include chat logs, turn-level interactional evidence, or partner-side accounts, this interpretation remains based on learner report. Even so, the accounts show a repeated pattern. For many beginner and lower-proficiency learners, open peer exchange did not consistently provide the correction, continuity, or topic control needed to sustain planned participation.

Participation adjustment and changing views of learning value

Later use is better understood as participation adjustment, not as a simple choice between persistence and dropout. Frequency changed, but so did learners' judgement of Tandem's learning value. As exchanges became less reliable for correction, topic control, or continuity, some learners began to treat the platform as a lighter, more occasional resource.

The shift was not mainly about losing interest in Chinese. Rather, learners began to reassess Tandem when exchanges no longer provided enough correction, continuity, or topic control for focused practice. Selective use therefore became a practical way to manage a learning space that remained useful in some situations but limited in others. The broader use conditions help explain this pattern. Questionnaire responses show that Tandem use was often low-frequency, fragmented, and short. Under these conditions, learners were likely to become more sensitive to whether a given exchange felt useful enough to continue. When interaction was weakly supported or hard to sustain, even learners who still wanted to improve their Chinese could begin to treat Tandem as a lighter or more occasional resource rather than as a main place for focused practice.

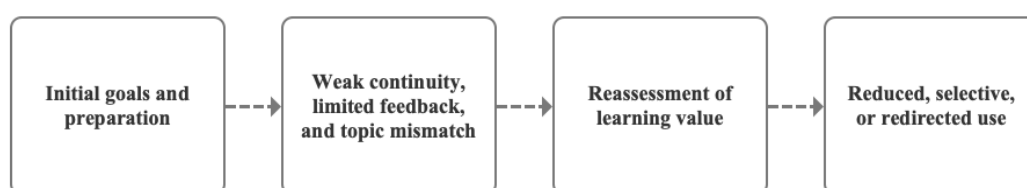
Selective use should therefore not be read only as a weak outcome. In this context, it was also an adaptive response to a learning environment that remained useful for exposure but less reliable for focused Chinese practice. For some learners, this adjustment was also linked to interpersonal safety. Inappropriate or uncomfortable exchanges could make learners more cautious about initiating conversations or using Chinese with unfamiliar partners. Some learners stayed on the platform but used it only when familiar partners replied, when they had extra time, or when they wanted light contact. Others moved part of their learning to tutoring, classroom study, AI tools, grammar support, or video-based input. These shifts show that learners were not simply withdrawing from Chinese learning. They were reorganising where and how they looked for support.

This interpretation fits earlier work that treats motivation as dynamic and shaped by lived experience rather than fixed in advance (Norton, 2013; Ushioda, 2011). It also aligns with research showing that learners may redirect effort when digital interaction no longer provides enough structure or value for their goals (Hsieh et al., 2022; Yin & Fathi, 2025). In the present study, many learners did not leave Tandem completely. Instead, they began to treat it as one resource among others.

Figure 4 summarises this recurring pattern across the questionnaire and interview data. It shows how learners described a movement from early planned participation toward reduced, selective, or redirected use when continuity, topic control, and language support were experienced as weak.

Figure 4

Heuristic Model of Participation Adjustment in Tandem-Based Chinese Learning



Note. The figure presents a heuristic summary of a recurring pattern across the questionnaire and interview data. It should not be read as a directly observed causal sequence or a fixed developmental model. Rather, it summarises how early planned participation could later shift toward reduced, selective, or redirected use when learners reported weak continuity, limited topic control, insufficient language support, and, for some learners, uncomfortable or unsafe interpersonal experiences.

Pedagogical implications for Chinese learning on Tandem

These findings suggest that platforms such as Tandem should not be treated as naturally effective spaces for out-of-class Chinese learning, especially for learners at earlier stages. They may provide access to real communication, but they do not guarantee regular replies, useful correction, stable topics, or supportive partner behaviour (O'Dowd, 2021; You et al., 2025).

For early-stage learners, open exchange may work better when it is linked to focused, manageable tasks rather than left as unstructured free conversation. Because learners in this study reported topic breakdown, limited correction, and difficulty expressing ideas, teachers could prepare short topic prompts, sentence starters, key vocabulary, pinyin support, and simple repair phrases before learners use the platform. These supports should be close to beginners' actual needs, such as greeting, self-introduction, asking simple questions, responding with short sentences, and requesting correction. They do not remove the open nature of Tandem. They give learners a clearer way to enter and manage interaction.

Follow-up classroom work is also important. After the exchange, teachers can ask learners to collect useful expressions, rewrite corrected sentences, identify one point of breakdown, and explain what helped or blocked the conversation. These activities may help connect open peer exchange with classroom learning, especially when the platform itself does not provide stable guidance.

Overall, the findings suggest that Tandem may be more suitable in contexts like this as a supplementary resource than as a main learning environment. It can support extra exposure and

flexible contact, but it may not consistently provide the guided support that beginner and lower-proficiency learners often need.

Limitations and scope

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was small, self-selected, and drawn from one platform. The findings should therefore not be treated as representative of all Chinese learners using Tandem. The interview sample was heavily weighted toward beginners, and the broader questionnaire sample also leaned toward beginner and lower-proficiency learners. This limits the study's ability to compare strategy use across proficiency levels. The findings should therefore be read mainly as evidence of beginner and lower-proficiency learners' reported experiences.

Second, the study relied on questionnaire responses and retrospective interviews rather than direct tracking of exchanges over time. It therefore captures learners' perceptions and later reconstructions, not the full interactional process itself. The absence of chat logs, turn-level data, partner-side perspectives, and observed correction episodes limits what can be said about correction, topic control, response rhythm, and continuity in actual exchanges.

Third, the harassment or inappropriate behaviour finding also needs caution. The questionnaire recorded whether learners selected this option, but it did not ask about the type, frequency, or severity of the behaviour. The interview accounts help show why safety matters for participation, but they cannot provide a full account of platform-based harassment.

For that reason, the study is best understood as evidence from weakly structured out-of-class learning conditions, especially among beginner and lower-proficiency learners using Tandem for Chinese practice. Its main value lies in showing how learners described the fit, and at times the lack of fit, between open peer exchange and the kind of support they wanted from it.

Conclusion

This study examined how beginner and lower-proficiency learners of Chinese used Tandem, what difficulties they reported during interaction, and how they later described changes in their use of the platform. Across the questionnaire and interview data, many participants began with clear goals and at least some preparation. They used a range of strategies, but these strategies were uneven. Strategies that could be used during interaction, such as correction requests, translation tools, note-taking, and using multiple modes to express meaning, appeared easier to maintain than advance planning or exchange-management practices.

Later changes in Tandem use were tied less to learners' interest in Chinese than to their changing judgement of the platform's learning value. Most learners did not simply leave. They used Tandem less often, used it more selectively, or moved part of their learning to tools and settings where support felt more reliable. In this sense, reduced use was not only a sign of weaker motivation. It was also a way of adjusting participation when open peer exchange no longer met learners' needs for focused Chinese practice.

The study therefore reframes reduced or selective platform use as a form of participation adjustment under weakly structured peer exchange. This reframing matters because it moves the explanation beyond individual motivation or platform failure. It shows how platform conditions, partner responsiveness, and the availability of language support shape whether early planned participation can continue.

For L2 Chinese digital exchange research, the study suggests that access to native or more proficient speakers should not be treated as enough in itself. For beginner and lower-proficiency learners, open peer exchange becomes useful only when learners can obtain support that fits their stage of learning. Tandem may therefore work better as a supplementary resource than as a main learning environment. It can provide exposure and flexible contact, but it needs to be connected with focused tasks, classroom follow-up, and simple support for managing interaction.

These findings should be read with caution. The study used a small, self-selected sample from one platform and relied on questionnaire responses and retrospective interviews rather than direct tracking of Tandem exchanges. It therefore shows how learners perceived and reconstructed their use of Tandem, not how all interactional processes unfolded on the platform. Future research could follow learners' actual exchanges over time and examine how correction, topic control, response rhythm, interpersonal safety, and interactional asymmetry develop in real conversations. This would help clarify when open peer exchange supports Chinese learning and when it begins to weaken sustained participation.

Disclosure of AI Use

The authors used ChatGPT by OpenAI for language editing during manuscript revision. The authors reviewed and revised all edited text and take full responsibility for the content, analysis, and final manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Xincheng Cao, upon reasonable request.

Ethics Statement

This study followed ethical guidelines for minimal-risk research with adult participants in the social sciences. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymised before analysis. Any contact information provided for interview follow-up was stored separately from survey responses and used only for recruitment purposes.

Appendix 1. Full Questionnaire

Survey on Chinese Learners' Strategies and Experiences on Tandem

欢迎您参加本研究调查。本研究旨在了解汉语学习者在 Tandem 平台上的学习策略与使用体验。本问卷为匿名填写，不收集可识别个人身份的信息。所有数据仅用于学术研究，不作任何商业用途。参与本研究完全自愿。您可在任何时候停止填写，且不会产生任何不利影响。

如您对本研究有任何疑问，欢迎通过电子邮件联系研究者。

我已阅读并理解以上说明，并自愿参加本研究。

Consent Statement

Thank you for participating in this study. This research aims to understand Chinese learners' strategy use and learning experiences on the Tandem platform.

This questionnaire is anonymous and does not collect personally identifiable information. All responses will be used for academic research only and not for any commercial purpose.

Participation is entirely voluntary. You may stop completing the questionnaire at any time without any negative consequences.

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the researcher by email.

I have read and understood the information above, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Yes

No

1. Background Information

Age group (Only participants aged 18 or above may take part in this study.)

18–24

25–30

31–35

36 or above

Nationality

Gender (Optional)

Male

Female

Non-binary / Other

Prefer not to say

Native language

How long have you been learning Chinese?

Less than 6 months

6 months to 1 year

1–2 years

More than 2 years

Self-rated Chinese proficiency

Beginner

Intermediate

Advanced

Which area do you feel strongest in?

Speaking

Listening

Reading

Writing

Do you currently live in a Chinese-speaking environment?

Yes

No

Are you currently studying Chinese in a formal setting (e.g., class, tutoring, exam preparation)?

Yes

No

Have you ever taken an official Chinese language test?

Yes

If yes, what is the highest level you have passed (e.g., HSK)? _____

No

Have you used any other language exchange platforms (e.g., HelloTalk)?

Yes. Platform name(s): _____

No

What are your main purposes for learning Chinese? (Select all that apply.)

To pass the HSK

Planning to visit China

To communicate with family or friends

For work

For academic study

Personal interest

2. Platform Use

When do you usually use Tandem for Chinese learning?

Morning

Afternoon

Evening

In fragmented time

Throughout the day

How many times per week do you typically use Tandem for Chinese communication?

Once or less

2–3 times

4–5 times

Every day

How long is each language exchange session on average?

Less than 10 minutes

10–30 minutes

30–60 minutes

More than 1 hour

What are your main communication modes on Tandem? (Select all that apply.)

Text

Voice

Video

Pictures

Do you have a regular language exchange partner on Tandem?

Yes

No

If yes, how often do you communicate with this partner each week?

Once or less

2–3 times

4 times

5 or more times

Approximate language ratio used in your exchanges

Chinese ____%

English ____%

Other language(s) ____%

3. Language Strategy Use

How often do you use translation tools to help with understanding?

(1 = Never, 5 = Always)

1 2 3 4 5

How often do you try to rephrase your partner's message?

(1 = Never, 5 = Always)

1 2 3 4 5

How often do you ask your partner to correct your Chinese?

(1 = Never, 5 = Always)

1 2 3 4 5

How often do you prepare what to say before chatting?

(1 = Never, 5 = Always)

1 2 3 4 5

How often do you take notes on new words during or after conversations?

(1 = Never, 5 = Always)

1 2 3 4 5

How often do you imitate your partner's expressions?

(1 = Never, 5 = Always)

1 2 3 4 5

How often do you set small goals for each exchange?

(1 = Never, 5 = Always)

1 2 3 4 5

How often do you use multiple modes to express yourself?

(1 = Never, 5 = Always)

1 2 3 4 5

How often do you negotiate how to manage the exchange (e.g., time, topic, turn-taking)?

(1 = Never, 5 = Always)

1 2 3 4 5

4. Metacognitive Strategy Awareness

I plan what to say in advance.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

I consciously adjust my speaking speed and vocabulary.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

I set learning goals (e.g., using complete sentences).

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

After chatting, I reflect on what I could not express clearly.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

When I have difficulty, I adjust my strategy.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

5. Communication Challenges

What challenges have you encountered during Tandem exchanges? (Select all that apply.)

Difficulty expressing ideas

Difficulty understanding your partner

Typing too slowly

Pronunciation or listening problems

Unfamiliarity with Chinese culture or expressions

Conversation topics run out

Fear of making mistakes

Unbalanced interaction

Harassment or inappropriate behaviour

Other: _____

How do you usually deal with these challenges? (Select all that apply.)

Change the topic

Use English or your native language

Stop the conversation

Use emojis or pictures

Ask your partner for help

Other: _____

6. Platform Evaluation

Which of the following Tandem features help your Chinese learning? (Select all that apply.)

Translation tool

Voice messages

Video calls

Suggested topics

Message correction

Matchmaking / search system

Learning reminders

None

How satisfied are you with your overall learning experience on Tandem?

(1 = Very dissatisfied, 5 = Very satisfied)

1 2 3 4 5

What features would you like to see in future updates?

AI pronunciation correction

Cultural explanation tools

Grammar support

Smarter partner matching

Other: _____

7. Open-Ended Reflections

Would you be open to a follow-up interview? If yes, you may leave your email address below.

Your contact information will be stored separately from your questionnaire responses and used only for interview recruitment.

Any suggestions on how the app could better support Chinese learning?

Appendix 2. Interview Participant Profiles

Table 2.1

Interview Participant Profiles

Participant	Self-rated level	Usage frequency	Main goal	Current use status
P1	Beginner	4–5 times a week, usually short sessions	To build basic daily communication through real contact with Chinese speakers and find a stable partner	Largely discontinued; use had gradually stopped over the previous two months
P2	Beginner	Once a week or less	To practise pronunciation and listening through voice-based exchange	Now uses Tandem very little; use had dropped sharply in the previous 2–3 weeks
P3	Beginner	Once a week or less	To become more familiar with basic sentence structure and everyday expression	Still uses Tandem occasionally, but at a very low frequency
P4	Beginner	2–3 times a week	To build basic vocabulary and sentence patterns through text-based practice	Still uses Tandem, but irregularly and with varying intensity
P5	Beginner	2–3 times a week	To practise listening, pronunciation, and basic spoken Chinese through voice exchange	Still uses Tandem intermittently, with occasional pauses
P6	Intermediate	Originally 2–3 times a week; now less active	To develop more natural Chinese expression and	Still present on the platform, but now uses it less and relies

informal spoken use	more on class and an existing language partner
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Note. The interview sample was weighted toward beginner learners. Five participants identified themselves as beginners, and one identified as intermediate.

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