# Chinese-English eTandem Learning: the Role of Pre-project Preparation and Collaboration

[UK] Kan Qian & [Austria] Ursula Stickler, The Open University
[China] Xu Cheng, Beijing Jiaotong University

With the acceleration of information and communication technology, Tandem learning as a form of collaborative language learning has moved from face-to-face to distance learning: the language exchange partners using various online tools to communicate in writing and speaking. The eTandem learning has caught the attention of language teachers and researchers in recent years. However, the majority of eTandem learning projects and research has been between European languages. This paper outlines a 6-week Chinese-English eTandem learning project jointly conducted by the beginners' Chinese course team at The Open University (UK) and the Distance Education School of Beijing Jiaotong University. The focus of the paper is on the role of pre-project preparation and collaborative facilitation between the two institutions. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data indicates that pre-project preparation and on-going facilitating collaboratively between two institutions of the project are of paramount importance to the success of eTandem learning project, especially when it involves a language that is entirely different from any European language.

**Key words:** eTandem learning, distance learning of Chinese, eTandem project design, collaborative facilitation

# 中英文电子搭档语言学习：前期准备及合作协调的作用

[英] 阚茜，[奥地利] Ursula Stickler, 英国开放大学
[中] 徐琤 ，北京交通大学

**内容提要**：在当今教育信息科技迅猛发展的时代，用语言搭档互助学外语也从传统的面对面走向了远程：搭档双方利用网络进行书面和口头交流。电子搭档语言学习近年来越来越引起外语教师和研究人员的注视。电子搭档学习和研究大多是在欧洲语言之间展开。近年来有了一些涉及汉语的电子搭档研究。本文介绍的为期六周的中英文电子搭档语言学习项目是由英国开放大学远程初级汉语教研室和北京交通大学远程教育学院合作进行的。本文重点探讨电子搭档语言学习项目前期准备和两所院校协调的作用。作者对收集到的数据进行了数量和定量分析，分析表明：项目前期准备和双方合作协调对电子搭档语言学习的成功起着至关重要的作用。

**关键词**：电子搭挡语言学习，远程汉语教学，网络语言搭挡项目设计，合作协调

**Introduction**
One of the challenges in distance language learning is the lack of speaking opportunities (Hurd, 2005). Although we have designed various online speaking activities to help students practice speaking Chinese, they are all structured exercises which lack the spontaneity and natural flow when you talk to a native speaker in real communication. The relative absence of a Chinese-speaking environment in the UK has made it very difficult for our students to be engaging in authentic communication situations where they can practise what they have learnt and keep on learning after they finish the course. In an effort to support students who completed a beginners' Chinese course to continue with their learning, a small scale project was carried out to explore the benefits of eTandem learning, in what ways eTandem learning can motivate learners, and what makes a successful eTandem learning project.

Tandem learning is a form of telecollaboration, which refers to language learning over "global communication networks" (Belz, 2002: 60-81). The two principles of tandem learning are autonomy and reciprocity (Brammerts, 2001; Brammerts, 2001b; Cziko, 2004): two speakers of different languages are working together to learn each other's language and gain information about the different cultures. eTandem has developed as a form of tandem where few native speakers are available for face-to-face collaboration (Brammerts & Kleppin, 2001a; Brammerts & Tandem Network, 2003); it utilises all forms of electronic communication, from email (St John & Cash, 1995; Stickler, 2004; Stockwell & Levy, 2001; Woodin, 1997) to web-based communication (Appel & Mullen, 2000), chat (Lee, 2004) and internet-telephony, e.g. Skype (Tian & Wang, 2010). The learning can be completely independent or supported by eTandem organisers, language advisors, or even integrated into a more formal course structure (Lewis, 2001; Lewis, Woodin & St John, 1996; Wang et al, 2012). The study reported here was supported by eTandem project organisers.

It is well-established in the literature that such language exchange supports language learning and helps motivate students as the learners use the language for authentic communication. Previous research has identified a variety of factors that play a crucial role for the success of eTandem learning such as the matching of expectations on both sides, time structure and student commitment (O'Dowd and Ritter, 2006), the design of the tasks (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Müller-Hartmann, 2000), and the pairing of learning partners and the on-going support (Stickler, 2001; Ushioda, 2000). Although there has recently been some research on learners of Chinese (Wang et al, 2012; Tian & Wang, 2010), there is little research on using eTandem for beginners' learners of Chinese, especially distance learners. This project aims to find out if the previous findings apply to the distant learners of Chinese at the beginners' level, and if there are any other factors that contribute to the success of eTandem learning. These are our research questions and this paper focuses on the second question, i.e. additional factors that contribute to the success of eTandem learning.

**1 Background**
With approximately 200.000 students, The Open University is the largest university in the United Kingdom, specializing in distance education. The Department of Languages at The Open University (OU) UK introduced beginners' Chinese to its curriculum in November 2009 in response to the increasing demands in language learning through distance education. At the start of the course in November 2009, 467 students were enrolled and a further 344 students were enrolled in November 2010. The study reported here was of the second cohort of students who studied the course in 2010/2011.

Beginners' Chinese was designed according to the blended learning model (Nicolson et al. 2011) with a mixture of self-study of print and online materials as well as online and face-to-face tutorials. The cohort is divided into learning groups of about 20 students in each group. The course teaches Mandarin Chinese in its standardized spoken modern form and in simplified characters. Students can study this course as part of a degree or a standalone course. The intended learning outcomes are comparable to A2 as defined by the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (2001). The total

duration of the course is 11 study months, which is about 300 study hours (based on an average figure of 7 hours per week). Currently, there is no intermediate course in Chinese for them to continue.

Students on the beginners' Chinese course come from all parts of the UK and also from Continental Western Europe. An enrolment survey (Table 1) shows a profile which is very different from campus-based universities in terms of age and educational background, though it is representative of distance learning courses at the OU and elsewhere (Kan & McCormick, 2012; Coleman & Furnborough, 2010).

**Table 1 Demographic information of the beginners' Chinese course *n*= 344 (Source: Students Statistics Service, IET, enrolment data 2010,  The Open University, UK)**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | Male | 52% |
| | Female | 48% |
| **Age** | under 25: | 15% |
| | 25 – 29: | 13% |
| | 30 – 39: | 22% |
| | 40 – 49: | 20% |
| | 50 – 59: | 16% |
| | 60 – 64: | 6% |
| | over 65: | 7% |
| **Qualifications** | No formal qualifications | 2% |
| | Less than A-Levels[1] | 21% |
| | A-Levels or Equivalent | 21% |
| | HE Qualifications | 38% |
| | Postgraduate Qualifications | 17% |
| | Not Known | 1% |

## 3 The project

Our Chinese-English eTandem was a 6-week project (9 weeks if we count the preparation and feedback weeks) starting at the end of October 2011 after OU students completed their final assessment.  Two weeks' preparation (see below for details of preparation), 6 weeks' eTandem learning, plus one week reflection and feedback, which took place immediately after the completion of the project when participants were invited to complete a follow-up questionnaire. In each one of the 6 learning weeks, participants wrote one email to each other in both Chinese and English according to the worksheets (see below for detailed description of Worksheets) and corrected each other's written work. They were also encouraged to have one Skype conversation with each other for about 30 minutes, talking half of the time in Chinese and the other half in English.

The pedagogical design of our Chinese-English eTandem project was based on the research discussed in the Introduction section, paying particularly care to avoid potential causes of failure: matching of expectations on both sides, time structure and student commitment (O'Dowd and Ritter, 2006), the design of the tasks (Müller-Hartmann, 2000; O'Dowd and Ritter, 2006; Wang et al, 2012), and the pairing of learning partners and the on-going support (Stickler, 2001; Ushioda, 2000). We also put considerable work into the pre-project preparation.

### 3.1 Two institutions

The two institutions involved were: Department of Languages, The Open University (OU), UK and School of Distance Learning and Continuing Education, Beijing Jiaotong University (BJU). The project was led by the first two authors and jointly facilitated by the third author.

---

[1] A-levels' are a public examination taken at the end of secondary education (at aged 18) used as part of university admissions.

## 3.2 Participants

There were 10 students from OU paired with 10 participants from BJU. The OU students had completed a beginners' Chinese course. The 10 participants from BJU consisted of both postgraduate students and staff who had been learning English for some years (see Table 2 for participants' profile). The third author of this paper was one of the 10 participants from BJU.

**Table 2: Participants' profile**

|  | OU | BJU |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | 4 male and 6 female | 1 male and 9 female |
| **Age range** | 48 – 76 years old | 23 – 45 years old |
| **Length of studying the language** | Majority 1 year studying Chinese | Between 8–20 years learning English |

## 3.3 Preparation work

Two weeks prior to the start of the project, participants from both institutions received the following documents: i) detailed description of the project (English version for the OU participants and Chinese version for the BJU participants); ii) the Consent form (in both English and Chinese versions); iii) the timetable indicating the start date of each week, the feedback week as well as the topic of each week; iv) the instruction on installing an audio recording device 'CallBurner' (for Skype); and v) the pairing information with contact details of each pair.

OU participants were recruited via the Chinese student forum[2] . The project team announced the project and asked students who were interested to send an email to the project mailbox with their preferred email address, Skype name and age. The first 10 students who expressed interest were chosen. BJU participants were recruited by telephoning potentially interested students and staff.   Once all the 20 participants were chosen, the project team carried out the preparation work in the following order:

1. Emailed all the participants detailed project description and the Consent form, asking them to return the signed Consent form if they still want to take part having read the project description.

2. Once the Consent forms were received, the project team (the three authors) carefully did the pairing of the learning partners via email exchanges and meetings on Skype.

3. Emailed all the participants the whole project timetable, the instruction on installing 'CallBurner' (for Skype) as well as the pairing information.

In addition, the third author of this paper at BJU held a pre-project briefing a week before the start of the project to make sure that all the participants understood what was expected of them and also to help with all the technical issues such as using Skype and installing CallBurner. No briefing was held at OU as students lived in different parts of the country, but the project team answered all the questions via email and on the forum.

## 3.4 Activity themes and worksheets

To avoid lose task design identified by previous research  (Müller-Hartmann, 2000) as potential failure of eTandem learning, and to add more support for low level learners, we decided to have a structured approach. Each week has a main theme to provide a focus for the conversation and writing. The six themes are: Getting to know each other, Family and friends, Food, The weekend, Comparisons and Travel (see Apppendix for a sample worksheet). The detailed worksheet contains information about what to do, how to

---

[2] This is a forum open to students who are registered on the beginners' Chinese course.

do it as well as useful expressions for the theme in both English and Chinese. The worksheet for each week was only emailed to all the participants 2-3 days before the start of each week so that they did not feel overwhelmed had all the 6 weeks' work been sent to them together. The purpose of the worksheets were: i) to highlight issues they should bear in mind about tandem learning such as avoiding direct translation, autonomy and reciprocity; ii) to provide useful phrases for a particular topic in both languages; and iii) to help participants to focus and to make necessary preparation before their Skype conversation and email writing. One participant said in the questionnaire:

> "It is a bit like a dating agency but being given topics to discuss means the conversation can be less forced and more natural at all levels. Beginners such as myself can stick to topic and more proficient students can go off topic as their skill levels allow, but using the topics to get started."
>
> [OU Participant A]

## 4 Findings

Data were collected from: i) copies of emails participants sent to each other were copied to the project team and systematically filed; ii) Skype recordings of most sessions (some participants forgot to press the recording button for some sessions); iii) Postings from the OU participants' on student forum and from the BJU students on QQ; iv) follow-up questionnaires in both English and Chinese; v) query or general emails from participants to the project team and emails/Skype recordings between the project team members; and vi) follow-up email (2 months after the completion of the project asking them if they were still in touch).

For the purpose of this paper, we concentrated on the last 3 sources of data, especially 18 completed questionnaires. The questionnaires in Chinese were translated where appropriate. Using thematic analysis, the two leading researchers examined the texts and connected the data during the process of analysis to identify salient features of how pre-project preparation and the on-going collaboration between the two institutions facilitated the learning and enhanced the learning experience. In cross research discussion, focused themes emerged: a) perceived benefits of eTandem learning; b) impact of differences between partners; c) cultural information and content; d) reflection on learning and/or teaching; and e) role of pre-project preparation. We shall first briefly outline participants' overall evaluation of the project and their perceived benefits of eTandem learning, and then move on to the role of pre-project preparation. The impact of differences between partners and cultural information merit a separate paper.

## 4.1 Participants' evaluation of the project

Although the participants were very diverse in terms of age, educational background, the level of the target language, their overall evaluation of the project was extremely positive. When asked 'What is your overall general evaluation of the eTandem project?', 17 out of 18 (94%)[3] who returned the questionnaires said the project was very well set out and executed, they benefited a lot and found the whole experience very enjoyable:

> "I think it was well set out and organised and I really enjoyed taking part."
>
> [OU Participant B]

> "通过与英国人书信往来以及在线对话交流，让我觉得学习英语是见轻松快乐的事。"
> *Through emails and online conversations, I felt learning English was pleasant and enjoyable.*
>
> [BJU Participant A]

## 4.2 Perceived benefits of eTandem learning

From the analysis of 18 completed questionnaires, the following broad categories of perceived benefits emerged: i) linguistic benefits such as practising colloquial expressions, learning subtle language points, etc.; ii) cultural benefits as they learnt about many cultural aspects of each other's culture, different attitudes to life, etc.; iii) personal and professional benefits as many of them felt more confident as a person, more confident to use information communication technology, and learnt how to design online learning activities, etc.; iv) interpersonal benefits as they felt happy to be of help to their partners,

---

[3] 1 respondent did not answer this question.

established friendship etc.; and v) other benefits include the feeling of authentic communication because for many of them, this was the first time they spoke with a native speaker of the language they were learning and they were speaking or writing not to pass the exam but to make themselves understood.

Two months after the completion of the project, six out of ten pairs confirmed that they were still exchanging emails and talking on Skype, which further supported the above perceived benefits. It also suggests that our initial aim of the project, i.e. supporting the learning of Chinese after the completion of the beginners' course, is achieved to a certain extend for 60% of participants.

### 4.3 The role of pre-project preparation and on-going collaboration
The analysis of the questionnaire clearly indicates that the pre-project preparation we carried out including all the briefing documents sent to all the participants (listed in 3.3) were crucial to the quality of the eTandem learning and the smooth running of the project. To the question 'What use did you make of the preparation documents…', all 18 respondents (100%) found the documents very useful. The data also shows that the continuous support provided by the project team members in both institutions enhanced their eTandem learning. Below are the main benefits of pre-project preparation and continuous facilitation.

### 4.3.1 Helping with time and expectation management
The detailed project description and timetable with topics for every week not only helped participants better manage their time but also helped them fully understand what was expected of them. They therefore felt more confident before the start of the project:

> "The project description helped outline and explain everything I wanted to know and the timetable helped me as I like to know what type of work would be required in the weeks to come."
>
> [OU participant C]

> "项目描述让我对项目有了大概的了解，而且我还知道了项目的具体要求，我应该做什么，怎么做，这些都很清楚，心里比较有底。也让我觉得这个项目不会很难，心里踏实了一些。"
> *The project description document gave me a rough understanding of the project as well as precise requirements such as what I should do, how to do it. So it is very clear and I felt at ease. Also I felt that it was going to be too difficult so I felt more confident.*
>
> [BJU Participant B]

### 4.3.2 Feeling motivated and in control
Another point mentioned by many respondents is that they felt motivated and in control of the learning:

> "These were all quite clear and useful in setting one's own goals."        [OU Participant D]

> "项目的描述让我对在接下来的项目中需要做的工作，以及必须掌握的一些技能有所准备。时间表上，每周一个主题，让我感觉每周都有不同的任务，非常有吸引力。"
> *The project description prepared me for the tasks ahead and the technical skills needed. The timetable with a different topic every week was very attractive.*
>
> [BJU Participant C]

### 4.3.3 Establishing rapport with project team members
Receiving all the documents well in advance, face-to-face briefing, weekly email from the project team and the three researchers answering questions from participants via email, QQ and the student forum helped establish a friendly rapport between the participants and the project team, making participants feel that they were not alone and well supported:

> "The Introduction was positive and friendly and gave appropriate guidance…" [OU Participant E]

> "…感觉项目很贴心…"   *…feel the project has a personal warm touch…*        [BJU Participant D]

> "准备阶段的培训非常必要，为后续的交流奠定了一个基础。…"

*The briefing in the preparation phase is essential, which paved way for later language exchanges.*

[BJU Participant E]

## 5 Conclusion

It is evident from this study that the pre-project preparation and the continuous support provided by the project team through collaboration between the two institutions played a crucial role in the success of this Chinese-English eTandem learning project. The data also indicates that structured guidance in the form of detailed weekly worksheets contributed towards the success of eTandem learning between European learners of beginners' Chinese and Chinese learners of English. We received very many good suggestions about how to improve pre-project preparation such as giving a brief introduction to the participants about their partners and the project team member during the preparation phase. We will take these into consideration in our future eTandem projects. We hope that our findings will benefit language teachers of Chinese and designers of eTandem projects as well as attract more research in the application of eTandem in teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

## References:

Appel, C., & Mullen, T. (2000). Pedagogical considerations for a web-based tandem language learning environment. *Computers and Education, 34*, 291-308.

Belz, J. A. (2002). Social dimensions of telecollaborative foreign language study. *Language Learning & Technology (LLT), 6*(1), 60-81.

Brammerts, H. (2001). Autonomes Sprachenlernen im Tandem: Entwicklung eines Konzepts. In H. Brammerts & K. Kleppin (Eds.), *Selbstgesteuertes Sprachenlernen im Tandem. Ein Handbuch* (pp. 9-23). Tübingen: Stauffenburg.

Brammerts, H., & Kleppin, K. (2001a). Hilfen für Internet-Tandem. In H. Brammerts & K. Kleppin (Eds.), *Selbstgesteuertes Sprachenlernen im Tandem* (Vol. 1, pp. 109-119). Tübingen: Stauffenburg.

Brammerts, H., & Kleppin, K. (Eds.). (2001b). *Selbstgesteuertes Sprachenlernen im Tandem. Ein Handbuch*. (1 ed. Vol. 1). Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag.

Brammerts, H., & Tandem Network, I. (2003). eTandem: Vermittlung von eTandempartnern  Retrieved 28/08/2012, from http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/

Coleman, J.A., & Furnborough, C. (2010). Leaner characteristics and learning outcomes on a distance Spanish course for beginners. *Systems*, 38, 14–29.

Cziko, G. A. (2004). Electronic Tandem Language Learning (eTandem): A Third Approach to Second Language Learning for the 21st Century. *CALICO, 22*(1), 25-39.

Hurd, S. (2005). Autonomy and the Distance Language Learner. In Holmberg, B., Shelley, M. and White, C. (Eds), *Distance Education and Languages*. Multilingual Matters Ltd., 1-19.

Kan, Q. and McCormick, R. (2012). Building course cohesion: the use of online forums in distance Chinese language learning. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*,

Lee, L. (2004). Learners' perspectives on neworked collaborative interaction with native speakers of Spanish in the US. *Language Learning and Technology (LLT), 8*(1), 83-100.

Lewis, T. (2001). Integration autonomen Lernens in das Curriculum: Das Tandem-Modul an der Universität Sheffield. (S. Szymanski, Trans.). In H. Brammerts & K. Kleppin (Eds.), *Selbstgesteuertes Sprachenlernen im Tandem.* (Vol. 1, pp. 123-129). Tübingen: Stauffenburg.

Lewis, T., & Walker, L. (Eds.). (2003). *Autonomous Language Learning in Tandem*. Sheffield: Academy Electronic Press.

Lewis, T., Woodin, J., & St John, E. (1996). Tandem learning: independence through partnership. In E. Broady & M. M. Kenning (Eds.), *Promoting Learner Autonomy in University Language Teaching* (pp. 105-120). London: AFLS & CILT.

Müller-Hartmann, A. (2000). The role of tasks in promoting intercultural learning in electronic learning networks. *Language Learning & Technology (LLT), 4* (2), 129-147.

Nicolson, M., Murphy, L. and Southgate, M. (2011). Language Teaching in a Changing World: Introduction and Overview. In *Language Teaching in Blended Contexts.* (Eds) Nicolson, M., Murphy, L. and Southgate, M. Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press Ltd.

O'Dowd, R. (2003). Understanding the "Other Side": Intercultural Learning in a Spanish-English E-Mail Exchange. *Language Learning & Technology (LLT), 7*(2), 118-144.

O'Dowd, R., & Ritter, M. (2006). Understanding and Working with 'Failed Communication' in Telecollaborative Exchanges. *CALICO, Special Issue, 23*(3), 623-642

St John, E., & Cash, D. (1995). German language learning via e-mail: a case study. *ReCALL, 7*(2), 47-51.

St John E., & White L. (2003). Nothing to Say? Suggestions for Tandem Learning. In T. Lewis & L. Walker (Eds.) *Autonomous Language Learning in Tandem*. Sheffield: Academy Electronic Press. Pp. 61-69.

Stickler, U. (2001). Beratung für das Tandemlernen. In H. Brammerts & K. Kleppin (Eds.), *Sebstgesteuertes Sprachenlernen im Tandem.* (Vol. 1, pp. 61-65). Tübingen: Stauffenburg.

Stickler, U. (2004). "…and furthermore I will correct your mistakes" Kulturelle Unterschiede bei der Fehlerkorrektur im Tandem. *Theorie und Praxis. Österreichische Beiträge zu Deutsch als Fremdsprache, 2004*, 79-93.

Stockwell, G., & Levy, M. (2001). Sustainability of E-mail Interactions Between Native Speakers and Nonnative Speakers. *Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), 14*(5), 419-442.

Tian, J., & Wang, Y. (2010). Taking language learning outside the classroom: learners' perspectives of eTandem learning via Skype. *Innovations in Language Learning and Teaching, 4*(3), 181-197.

Ushioda, E. (2000). Tandem language learning via email: From motivation to autonomy. *ReCALL, 12*(2), 121-128.

Wang, J., Berger, C., & Szilas, N. (2012). Pedagogical Design of an eTandem Chinese-French Writing Course. *Journal of Universal Computer Science, vol.18, no.3*, 393-409

Woodin, J. (1997). E-mail tandem learning and the communicative curriculum. *ReCALL, 9*(1), 22-33.

**Authors:** Kan Qian, PhD in Linguistics, Lecturer in Chinese, Department of Languages at The Open University (UK) (qian.kan@open.ac.uk); Ursula Stickler, PhD in Philosophy, Lecturer in German, Department of Languages at The Open University (UK) (ursula.stickler@open.ac.uk); Xu Cheng, Associate Professor, School of Continuing Education at Beijing Jiaotong University (zhxu@bjtu.edu.cn).

作者简介：阚茜，语言学博士，英国开放大学语言系汉语讲师 (qian.kan@open.ac.uk); Ursula Stickler, 语言学博士，英国开放大学语言系德语讲师 (ursula.stickler@open.ac.uk); 徐琤，副教授，北京交通大学远程与继续教育学院 (zhxu@bjtu.edu.cn)。

**Appendix**: Sample worksheet

**Week 2**                                                    **eTandem Activity Worksheet**

**Topic: Friends and Family**



© U. Stickler

**1 What to do?**
Have you sent your eTandem partner corrections to his/her last email? If not, do this before starting the next email exchange.

Then write an **email** to your eTandem partner in both Chinese and English As usual: do not directly translate the text but make sure that the language you use is simple enough for your partner to understand.
Alternatively: if you have decided to have a **Skype** conversation, prepare for this task by looking at the words and phrases below and noting down some words relevant for your own situation. Being prepared for a live speaking situation helps you to relax and enjoy the conversation.

Whether in speaking or in writing: remember to switch the language half way through. When emailing, remember to cc to:

**fels-Chinese-tandem@open.ac.uk; ycjfzx@bjtu.edu.cn**

When using Skype, remember that one of you will need to record the conversation.

**2 Guidelines / Content**
In this second eTandem exchange you will be talking or writing about your family and friends, describing people, describing relationships between people, talking/writing about activities you do with certain friends.

**3 Useful phrases**
Here are some words and phrases that can help you; use an online dictionary if you like to check the following terms (http://www.nciku.com/). For OU students, you can go to Sessions 15 and 19 in Module Book 2 for some other useful expressions:

| English | Chinese |
|---|---|
| husband / wife | 先生，丈夫，老公/太太，妻子，老婆 |
| partner | 同伴 |
| father / mother / parents | 父亲，爸爸/母亲，妈妈/父母 |

| sisters | 姐妹 |
|---|---|
| older sister / younger sister | 姐姐/妹妹 |
| brothers | 兄弟 |
| older brother / younger brother | 哥哥/弟弟 |
| siblings | 兄弟姐妹 |
| children / daughter / son | 孩子/女儿/儿子 |
| female friend / girlfriend | 女朋友 |
| male friend / boyfriend | 男朋友 |
| best friend | 最好的朋友 |
| work colleague(s) | 同事 |
| older than me | 比我大 |
| younger than me | 比我小；比我年轻 |
| taller than me | 比我高 |
| shorter than me | 比我矮 |
| on the right (of the picture) | 在（照片的）右边 |
| on the left | 在左边 |
| in the middle | 在中间 |
| behind | 在后面 |
| in front of | 在前面 |
| between | 在中间 |



You can also use a photograph of your family or a group of friends to help you structure your email or your talk.