# Leveraging AI for Effective Teaching: A Machine Learning Approach to Tandem Learning in Mathematics

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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## Ethical approval

Ethical consent was deemed unnecessary by the authors and the educational institution; however, written consent was still obtained from all participants.

## Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study’s conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by Bor Bregant, Darjo Felda, and Daniel Doz. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Bor Bregant and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

## Data availability statement

The authors declare that the data supporting the findings of this study are publicly available. Dataset used is available at

https://github.com/borbregant/ai\_tandem\_learning/blob/main/data\_cleaned.xlsx. Machine learning code is available at

https://github.com/borbregant/ai\_tandem\_learning/blob/main/analiza\_test.ipynb. t-SNE visualization code is available at

https://github.com/borbregant/ai\_tandem\_learning/blob/main/t-SNE.ipynb.

## Abstract

This study explores the use of machine learning (ML) to predict high school students’ responses to tandem learning in mathematics, aiming to support personalized teaching strategies. Data from 89 students and 13 predictors were used to model a three-state outcome representing response to tandem learning. Predictor variables included demographics, academic performance, personality traits (MBTI), mathematical anxiety and motivation, and interaction measures during tandem learning. Nine classification algorithms were evaluated using 5×2-fold stratified cross-validation.

Results showed modest performance, with Random Forest and K-Nearest Neighbors achieving the best accuracy (0.55 and 0.53) and macro F1 scores (0.37 and 0.36) using all predictors. When the outcome was simplified to two classes and the dataset balanced, Gradient Boosting performed best (accuracy and F1-score = 0.59). These findings suggest current models and variables offer limited predictive power in this context.

Although ML methods struggled to accurately predict student responses in a complex, imbalanced setting, simplifying the classification task improved results. This highlights potential in using ML for educational decisions if models are refined and supported by larger, more informative datasets. For now, such tools may not yet reliably guide teachers in selecting group learning strategies.

### Keywords

Assessment, mathematics education, machine learning, tandem learning, teaching methods

### Math subject classification, MSC2020

97D40, 97D60, 62P99

## Introduction

Deep comprehension and knowledge retention are crucial in teaching mathematics (Adler et al., 2014). Recent educational models advocate for indirect learning processes, emphasizing the drawbacks of large classrooms (Mbofana & Banda, 2022; Olasen & Lawal, 2020) and traditional teacher-centered methods (Dervić et al., 2018; Lasry et al., 2014). Small-group learning, including tandem learning where two students collaborate on various activities (Stickler & Emke, 2011; G. Wilson & Blednick, 2011), has been shown to enhance academic achievement (Kalaian & Kasim, 2014), attitudes towards learning (Gaudet et al., 2010), and participation in STEM courses (Wieselmann et al., 2020). This learning method is not only theoretical but is also widely implemented by many teachers in practice, since it is used at some level by many teachers (Slavin et al., 2003).

Understanding and effectively mapping students' cognitive and non-cognitive traits, demographic factors, and teacher-related aspects is essential for implementing any teaching method (Gnesdilow et al., 2013; Kurniawati et al., 2023; Q. Li et al., 2021; Puklek, 2001; Van Der Laan Smith & Spindle, 2007; Van Diggele et al., 2020). It is crucial to recognize the appropriate conditions for the application of such learning methods to maximize their positive impact on student outcomes. The recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), particularly machine learning (ML) based algorithms, offer unique opportunities for researchers to predict personalized education outcomes through the analysis of heterogeneous data (Sekeroglu et al., 2019; Yağcı, 2022). The success of these models relies on their interpretability, replicability, and generalizability, and there is a growing trend to enhance these aspects (Rastrollo-Guerrero et al., 2020).

While there is an increasing use of ML/AI models to predict overall student success in education (Ho et al., 2021; Ibarra-Vazquez et al., 2023; Luan & Tsai, 2021; Musso et al., 2020; Yağcı, 2022), their applicability in evaluating the effectiveness of specific teaching methods, especially collaborative formats like tandem learning, remains limited. To address this, the present study integrates ML with tandem learning, motivated by the need to align pedagogical innovation with data-driven personalization. Tandem learning promotes peer collaboration and interpersonal interaction, yet predicting its effectiveness on an individual level is complex. Machine learning offers a promising approach to model this variability, particularly when grounded in constructivist learning theory and personalized learning paradigms, which emphasize learner agency and context-sensitive strategies (Taylor et al., 2024; Villegas-Ch et al., 2024). Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by developing machine-learning models using a Slovene dataset (*N* = 89). These models will predict the personalized success of tandem learning based on various demographic factors, teacher-related factors, as well as cognitive and non-cognitive factors. The aim of the research is, therefore, to shed light on which ML algorithms perform the best and are the most accurate in predicting the effectiveness of tandem learning considering 13 features, including gender, class, teacher, previous mathematics grade, MBTI variables (extroversion-introversion, sensing-intuition, thinking-feeling, and judging-perceiving), mathematical anxiety, mathematical motivation, qualitative interaction in tandem learning, quantitative interaction in tandem learning, and whether the student outperformed their partner in tandem learning. Having a deeper understanding of which algorithm is the most accurate in predicting the effectiveness of applying the tandem learning format might help educators and researchers to adopt new methods, based on ML, to analyze data and implement tailored learning and teaching methods.

## Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Tandem learning

Recent trends show a shift toward developing and using alternative, indirect forms of educational processes (Arias & Peralta, 2011; Blažič et al., 2003). This is driven by the belief that such approaches are more effective in fostering improved academic achievement (Kalaian & Kasim, 2014; S. Wang et al., 2023), developing more positive attitudes toward learning (Gaudet et al., 2010; Hillyard et al., 2010), and enhancing persistence in STEM courses and programs (Kalaian et al., 2018; Micari et al., 2010; Wieselmann et al., 2020; S. Wilson & Varma-Nelson, 2016).

One notable small-group learning practice among these alternatives is tandem learning. This unique approach involves pairs of students conducting experiments together, formulating reports, solving problems, and so forth (Stickler & Emke, 2011; Tomić, 2002; G. Wilson & Blednick, 2011). Tandem learning stands out for its simplicity from an organizational standpoint, offering increased opportunities for active engagement compared to frontal and group teaching methods. Importantly, it provides a middle ground between the collaborative nature of group learning and the individualized approach of solo learning (Blažič et al., 2003).

The implementation of group learning serves to accomplish five significant objectives, as articulated by Peklaj (2001): (1) facilitating mutual understanding among students, (2) fostering a sense of group identity, (3) promoting peer support, (4) cultivating an appreciation for differences among group members, and (5) instilling characteristics of teamwork. This approach closely aligns with the five fundamental components of cooperative learning as outlined by Johnson et al. (1991), namely (1) positive interdependence, where students rely on each other for success; (2) face-to-face promotive interaction, encouraging constructive communication; (3) individual accountability and personal responsibility, ensuring active participation of each student; (4) regular utilization of interpersonal and small group social skills; and (5) consistent, periodic evaluation of group dynamics and performance. By embracing these principles, educators can better equip their students with the social and interpersonal competencies essential for success in the contemporary world. Slavin et al. (2003) identified four significant theoretical perspectives on the achievement effects of cooperative learning: (1) motivationalist, (2) social cohesion, (3) cognitive-developmental, and (4) cognitive-elaboration. The last two focus on the interaction among groups of students, and all four perspectives can be viewed as complementary.

### 2.2 Machine learning and classification

Data mining is the process of uncovering hidden patterns, relationships, or insights within vast datasets through techniques from statistics and database management (Baradwaj & Pal, 2012). It involves data preprocessing to prepare information for analysis and utilizes methods such as clustering and association rule mining (Singhal & Jena, 2013). In contrast, ML, a subset of AI, focuses on building predictive models by allowing computers to learn from data and make decisions or predictions (Candanedo et al., 2018). The sequences of steps identified in extracting knowledge from data are shown in Figure 1 below.

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Figure : Knowledge discovery process.

ML encompasses various learning paradigms, including the classification process, and finds applications in areas like recommendation systems. Classification, a fundamental task in both data mining and ML, involves categorizing data into predefined classes, such as binary or three-state classification, based on patterns learned from labeled data. This classification process is employed in various domains, such as healthcare and sentiment analysis, which includes educational sciences (Shaik et al., 2023), to make data-driven decisions (Baradwaj & Pal, 2012).

Classification in ML is a pivotal process where the primary goal is to train a model to assign predefined labels or categories to new, unseen instances based on patterns identified during the learning phase (Charbuty & Abdulazeez, 2021). It relies on the extraction of features from the input data, which are then used to make predictions about the class to which a particular instance belongs. This process involves both supervised learning, where the model is trained on labeled data, and unsupervised learning, where the model must identify patterns in unlabeled data (Berry et al., 2020).

Sentiment analysis, as mentioned in the context of educational sciences, is a specific application of classification in natural language processing (Mite-Baidal et al., 2018). This involves determining the sentiment expressed in textual data, such as reviews, social media posts, or survey responses. By classifying sentiments into categories like positive, negative, or neutral, organizations can gain valuable insights into public opinion and tailor their strategies accordingly.

In mathematics education, ML has been applied to predict learning outcomes, classify student proficiency levels, and personalize learning pathways (Gabriel et al., 2018; Mgonja, 2024). Previous studies used ML to classify students’ mathematics outcomes (Lavelle-Hill et al., 2024; C. Li et al., 2024), identify the most influential factors on students’ mathematics achievements (Musso et al., 2020; F. Wang et al., 2023), and evaluating how these predictors might change over time (Lavelle-Hill et al., 2024). Previous literature has focused mainly on evaluating the role of various demographic factors on students’ achievements, however, very few studies investigate how peer collaboration dynamics influence these outcomes or how they can be modeled and enhanced using ML. Therefore, a gap in the literature might be found when examining whether and how ML might give educators a clearer picture of the effectiveness of pedagogical interventions.

Thus, this paper contributes to the literature by proposing a novel integration: using ML to analyze and optimize tandem learning interactions in mathematics education. This approach not only offers a new lens on collaborative learning but also extends ML applications into more socially complex and pedagogically rich contexts.

### 2.3 Connecting tandem learning and machine learning

Technologies can be considered in terms of whether they are mainly student teaching (with a primarily instructionist approach), student supporting (primarily constructivist approach), or teacher supporting (which primarily helps teachers do tasks they already do but faster or with less effort) (Holmes et al., 2019). ML largely fits within the student-supporting and teacher-supporting categories, enabling data-informed instruction and deeper insights into learner profiles.

Beyond its broader applications, ML has been harnessed to precisely forecast student success (Abana, 2019; Kotsiantis et al., 2004; Ofori et al., 2020; Qazdar et al., 2019; Rastrollo-Guerrero et al., 2020; Yakubu & Abubakar, 2022), identify at-risk learners (Adnan et al., 2021; Chui et al., 2020), and tailor educational interventions (Luan & Tsai, 2021; Stimpson & Cummings, 2014; Tsai et al., 2020; Yang, 2021), particularly within mathematics education (Hwang & Tu, 2021). These applications often rely on performance indicators, behavioral data from learning management systems, or psychometric assessments. The concept of “learning analytics” was introduced and demonstrated by other studies (Bhusal, 2021; Cortez & Silva, 2008; Siemens & Gasevic, 2012) before the widespread use of ML, when studies relied on weaker statistical methods. Aside from forecasting success, ML can help us identify the most important variables that affect said forecast (Lu et al., 2020; Luan & Tsai, 2021). Multiple studies have delved into the analysis of crucial features in the learning environment (Bregant et al., 2025; Hodges, 2018; Humphrey et al., 2009; Moradi et al., 2018; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001), however only a few have harnessed the power of modern algorithms, such as ML, which hold the potential for significantly enhanced sight. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to explore in great detail the feature selection problem.

However, much of the existing ML literature focuses on traditional, individual-centered learning environments. Few studies have examined how ML can be used to model collaborative or peer-based instructional methods—such as tandem learning. Tandem learning, a model that emphasizes reciprocal peer interaction and co-construction of knowledge, draws on socio-constructivist theories of learning (Topping, 2005; Vygotskij & Cole, 1981). These theories highlight the central role of social interaction, scaffolding, and peer mediation in shaping cognitive development. Despite its theoretical potential, tandem learning remains underexplored in terms of predictive modeling and feature discovery using ML techniques.

This gap is especially significant because collaborative learning environments involve a different set of variables compared to individual learning: relational factors (e.g., group dynamics, perceived partner performance), interaction quality, and affective engagement may play a larger role than traditional achievement metrics. By applying ML in the context of tandem learning, this study aims not only to estimate student receptivity to the method, but also to uncover the most salient features that influence its success. In doing so, we treat ML not simply as a predictive tool, but as a lens for refining our understanding of the mechanisms behind effective collaborative learning.

The integration of tandem learning and ML in the context of mathematics education stems from a growing need to personalize and enhance learning experiences through data-driven insights. Tandem learning—traditionally associated with language learning contexts—refers to a collaborative model where learners with complementary skills work together toward shared learning goals. When adapted to subjects like mathematics, tandem learning promotes peer-assisted learning, metacognitive engagement, and student agency—all key components aligned with constructivist and socio-cultural theories of learning (Slavin et al., 2003).

The motivation for combining this pedagogical model with ML techniques lies in the potential of ML to capture complex patterns in student interaction data and learning behavior, thereby offering predictive insights into students' performance, engagement, and progression (Baker & Inventado, 2014). ML can help identify which features of tandem interactions (e.g., frequency, reciprocity) are most predictive of successful learning outcomes, allowing educators to optimize peer matching and intervention strategies. This integration aligns with recent advances in educational data mining and learning analytics, which emphasize data-informed pedagogy (Romero & Ventura, 2010).

## Empirical work

The present research was conducted as the effectiveness of tandem learning in high school mathematics remains unclear due to the complexity of numerous variables influencing its success.

This study aims to leverage three-state classification machine learning algorithms to analyze multifaceted variables to determine the successfulness of a tandem learning environment.

Given the scarcity of comprehensive studies employing ML algorithms to assess teaching method selections, this research acknowledges the potential limitations in drawing definitive conclusions. While aiming to discern patterns of predicting the success of a tandem learning environment, this study will consider the need for a cautious interpretation of results. Even in the absence of conclusive findings, insights gathered from the analysis will contribute to the ongoing discourse on the efficacy of tandem learning in mathematics education. Therefore, we hypothesize that even when feeding ML models with diverse data sets encompassing student profiles and collaborative dynamics, some algorithms will perform subpar, while others may perform fair.

### 3.1 Methodology

In the present research, the causal non-experimental method of pedagogical research is applied.

### 3.2 Sample

In this retrospective study, we used a dataset gathered at a high school in Slovenia, which is publicly available at (Author, 2023). The sample comprised 89 11th- and 12th-grade students of a Slovenian Gymnasium (i.e., high school); 28 males and 61 females. The topics covered during the tandem learning sessions were vectors for 11th-grade students and conic sections for 12th-grade students. While informative, the relatively small sample size may limit generalizability and affect the performance stability of machine learning models.

Participants in the study engaged in tandem learning for about a week during class time, with no randomization in pairings. The structure involved a mix of regular classroom activities and tandem learning sessions, with students seated in pairs at two-seat desks. The efficacy of tandem learning was measured across various factors, categorized into demographic, psychological, and tandem-learning-related variables (see section 3.5.1).

### 3.3 Data preprocessing and data analysis

The gathered data was analysed using the *Python* programming language, primarily using *pandas* (version 2.1.3) and *scikit-learn* (version 1.3.2) libraries. ML code, as well as variable importance and other data analysis notebooks, are openly accessible at (Author, 2023).

The dataset was already in the form of tidy data (Wickham, 2014). Categorical variables, which were a priori encoded using label encoding, were transformed into dummy variables using one-hot as most ML algorithms require numerical input and do not handle categorical data well, that is, not continuous (Tan & Pu, 2023; Wu et al., 2020).

We implemented nine ML algorithms, chosen for their effectiveness in classification tasks and their ability to perform three-state classification (see references at each algorithm). These models were selected to explore a range of approaches—including probabilistic, instance-based, linear, and ensemble methods—and to assess their comparative performance, i.e. their capability of predicting correctly the effectiveness of tandem learning in the context of a relatively small and moderately complex dataset. This variety also allows us to evaluate which types of models may be more robust in low-sample educational settings, acknowledging that the small dataset size likely impacts classification accuracy.

Naive Bayes (NB; Frank et al., 2000): it is a probabilistic classifier based on Bayes' theorem, and it assumes independence among features;

k-Nearest Neighbors (k-NN; Zhang, 2016): it is a non-parametric and instance-based learning algorithm that classifies data points based on the majority class of their k-nearest neighbors. It is effective in classification, and it is sensitive to the choice of the distance metric;

Decision Tree (Charbuty & Abdulazeez, 2021): it is a hierarchical tree-like structure that represents decisions based on features; it is easily interpretable, however, it is prone to overfitting;

Logistic Regression Models with OvA strategy (LR; Sun et al., 2019): It is a binary classification algorithm used to predict the probability of an instance belonging to a particular class. However, when dealing with multi-class classification problems (more than two classes), the one-vs-all (OvA) strategy, also known as one-vs-rest (OvR), is often employed. The OvA strategy involves training three separate binary logistic regression models. Each model is designed to distinguish one class from the combination of the other two;

Linear Discriminant Analysis (LDA; Xanthopoulos et al., 2013): it is a classification algorithm seeking to find linear combinations of features that best separate classes; it is useful in dimensionality reduction and feature extraction, but it assumes normally distributed classes and equal covarances;

AdaBoost (with 1000 estimators; Schapire, 2003): it is an ensemble learning method that combines weak classifiers to create a strong classifier; it gives more weight to misclassified instances, which improves the overall performance of the algorithm; it is also effective in boosting the performance of decision trees;

Gradient Boosting (GB with 1000 estimators; Natekin & Knoll, 2013): it is an ensemble technique that builds trees sequentially, with each tree correcting the errors of the previous one; it often employs decision trees as weak learners; it is a robust and widely used classification technique;

Support Vector Machine (SVM with RBF kernel; Suthaharan, 2016): it is a powerful algorithm for classification which constructs a hyperplane that maximally separates the classes; it is effective in high-dimensional spaces and can handle non-linear relationships through kernel functions;

Random Forest (RF with 1000 estimators; Rodriguez-Galiano et al., 2015): it is an ensemble learning method that builds multiple decision trees and combines their predictions while reducing overfitting and improving accuracy compared to individual trees; it is widely used in classification tasks.

Said algorithms are capable of performing 3-state classification. Models were evaluated using the 5x2 cross-validation (CV) with stratified folds (Cieslak & Chawla, 2008), with the main metric of performance evaluation being macro F1-score through average fold repetition (Chicco & Jurman, 2020). The 5x2-CV is a technique that splits datasets into two subsets (folds), and the model is trained and tested on these subsets. The process is repeated five times, resulting in 10 overall evaluations. The final performance metric is the average of the performance metrics obtained from the ten evaluations. This method helps to reduce the variability that might arise from a single random split and provides more reliable estimates of the model’s performance. This method assesses how well an ML model generalizes unseen data and helps prevent overfitting. It is useful when the dataset is limited (Raschka, 2018). F1-score is a metric commonly used to evaluate the performance of a classification model, specifically when dealing with unbalanced datasets (Chicco & Jurman, 2020). It is the harmonic mean of precision () and recall (), ranging from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating better model performance (L. Wang et al., 2021). In the multi-class case, we must consider all the classes, i.e., all the entries of the confusion matrix. To do so, we require a multi-class measure of precision and recall to be inserted into the harmonic mean. Such metrics may have two different specifications, giving rise to two different metrics: Micro F1-Score and Macro F1-Score (Opitz & Burst, 2019). The F1 macro score in a multi-class scenario involves computing Macro-Precision and Macro-Recall by averaging precision for each predicted class and recall for each actual class. In Macro F1-Score, all classes carry equal weight in the calculation, eliminating distinctions between highly and poorly populated classes (Grandini et al., 2020).

Additionally, the t-distributed stochastic neighbor embedding (t-SNE; Van der Maaten & Hinton, 2008) was applied to facilitate dimensionality reduction and the visualization of high-dimensional data. As a non-linear technique, t-SNE preserves local structures and similarities between data points, enabling the identification of clusters and underlying patterns that may not be captured by linear methods. This approach is particularly suited for exploratory data analysis.

### 3.4 Previous findings on the used dataset

The dataset used in this study comprises 14 variables derived from a total of 56 survey items administered after a one-week implementation of tandem learning. The variables fall into three broad categories: psychological-emotional constructs, demographic-academic background, and tandem-specific learning experiences. Data were collected using a combination of standardized psychological instruments, self-report Likert-scale questionnaires, and school records. Psychological constructs were assessed using: (1) the OEJTS (*Operationalized Jungian Types Scales*) for MBTI personality traits (Introversion, Sensing, Feeling, Judging), (2) the AMAS (*Abbreviated Math Anxiety Scale*) for mathematics anxiety, and (3) a shortened version of the ATMI (*Attitudes Toward Mathematics Inventory*) for motivational orientation. Demographic and academic data, such as gender, classroom teacher, class group, and recent math grades, were obtained from official school records. Tandem-specific variables were collected through Likert-scale items developed for this study, focusing on students’ perceptions of their group interaction (both qualitative and quantitative aspects), as well as their relative performance compared to their partner. These items were based on prior qualitative research and piloted in a preliminary study for clarity and relevance.

In our research, we utilized a pre-analyzed dataset, as explored by (Author, 2024). The internal consistency of variables, assessed through instruments comprising multiple items, was previously examined with Cronbach alpha being used for variables (1) Anxiety, (2) Motivation, (3) Introversion, (4) Sensing, (5) Feeling, and (6) Judging all of them having fair results (α > 0.70).

The selection of variables in the ML models was not arbitrary, but theoretically grounded in a model proposed by Author (2024), which emphasizes three critical domains influencing tandem learning outcomes: (1) learner characteristics (e.g., personality, anxiety, motivation), (2) contextual-academic background (e.g., grades, class environment), (3) interactional dynamics within tandem learning (e.g., quality of peer interaction, perceived performance differentials).

This tripartite framework draws on constructivist learning theory (Vygotskij & Cole, 1981), as well as peer learning literature (Topping, 2005), suggesting that both internal learner traits and socially constructed experiences shape educational outcomes in collaborative settings.

Moreover, feature importance was performed using Mutual information and recursive feature elimination in regards to logistic regression, highlighting that variables related to tandem learning held the utmost significance, followed by variables in a general context, and lastly, variables associated with students' psychological profiles. Key predictors for student responses were identified, with outperforming partner, class, and qualitative interaction within groups being the most influential, as indicated by mutual information scores. Recursive feature analysis underscored the importance of qualitative interaction, outperforming partner, and gender as primary predictors.

In addition, correlation analysis using Spearman ρ (all variables were analyzed with the Shapiro-Wilk test as normally distributed) unveiled meaningful relationships within the dataset. The three most positively correlated pairs were gender-anxiety, interaction qualitative-interaction quantitative, and grade-motivation, while the most negatively correlated pairs were motivation-anxiety, gender-feeling, and gender-motivation. All correlation coefficients exhibited a moderate strength of association.

### 3.5 Results

#### 3.5.1 Student sample and variables used

The target variable was a three-state measure of success on a 3-level Likert scale (“successful”, “neutral”, “not successful”), both regarding academic performance as well as general well-being during the implementation of tandem learning. The predictors were variables in (1) a general sense (gender, class, teacher, previous mathematics grade), (2) psychological sense (MBTI variables: extroversion-introversion, sensing-intuition, thinking-feeling and judging-perceiving, and other variables: mathematical anxiety and motivation), and (3) tandem-learning-related variables (qualitative interaction, quantitative interaction, and whether the student outperformed their partner). All variables provided were used for ML purposes. Their descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1, Table 2, and Figure 2.

Table : Dataset description of tandem-learning-related, and general variables used. The categorical variables, initially label encoded, were transformed using one-hot encoding, generating dummy variables, as that is needed for ML algorithms used (see references in section 3.3.). Ordinal variables assessed using Likert scales are also described utilizing measures of central tendency due to their inherent numerical order and range.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Successfulness | Grade | Interaction  quantitative | Interaction  qualitative | Outperforming  partner | Class | Teacher | Gender | |
| *M* | 2.4 | 3.4 | 2.2 | 2.1 | 2.1 | Categorical  (7 options) | Categorical  (4 options) | Categorical  (2 options) |
| *SD* | 0.6 | 1.0 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 0.6 |
| *min* | 1.0 | 2.0 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 1.0 |
| 25% | 2.0 | 3.0 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 2.0 |
| 50% | 2.0 | 3.0 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 2.0 |
| 75% | 3.0 | 4.0 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 2.0 |
| *max* | 3.0 | 5.0 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 3.0 |

Note. M = mean, SD = standard deviation.

Table : Dataset description of psychological variables. All variables belonging to this type were treated as continuous.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Anxiety | Motivation | Introversion | Sensing | Feeling | Judging |
| *M* | 25.8 | 20.4 | 20.6 | 22.7 | 23.3 | 22.8 |
| *SD* | 6.8 | 6.3 | 5.6 | 4.5 | 4.7 | 5.7 |
| *min* | 10.0 | 7.0 | 8.0 | 12.0 | 9.0 | 9.0 |
| 25% | 21.0 | 16.0 | 16.0 | 20.0 | 20.0 | 20.0 |
| 50% | 26.0 | 20.0 | 21.0 | 23.0 | 23.0 | 23.0 |
| 75% | 31.0 | 24.0 | 24.0 | 25.0 | 26.0 | 26.0 |
| *max* | 40.0 | 34.0 | 37.0 | 35.0 | 35.0 | 37.0 |

A group of graphs with different colored bars

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Figure 2: Variables used.

For ML purposes that follow it is important to know that the target variable was not balanced with represented classes being 6, 39, and 44, indicating the population distribution across the ordinal classes 0, 1, and 2, respectively, on a Likert scale. Therefore, the usage of the F1-score for the assessment of the model’s performance was deemed suitable (Chicco & Jurman, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). For baseline reference, we consider a simple model that predicts the majority class for all instances, resulting in an accuracy of 44 (representing the largest class) out of 89 (total samples), equivalent to 49%. However, it is crucial to note that the evaluation metric after surpassing this baseline would be the F1-score, providing a more nuanced assessment of the model's performance in handling imbalanced class distributions. Subsequently, we transitioned to a two-state classification by merging classes 0 (“not successful”) and 1 (“neutral”). Finally, we reintroduced the three-state classification, but this time with a reduced set of variables, based on their predictive strength as seen in the literature, to enhance the model performance. Notably, throughout this process, we refrained from dropping variables and merging classes simultaneously.

#### 3.5.2 Model performance

According to the F1-metric, the two models with generally better performances in our experiments were RF and k-NN. Their performances are fair, as their accuracy was still better than a number of samples in the majority class (49.4%). Therefore, the models outperform the baseline. Other models performed worse, their poor performance indicating they might not be learning the underlying patterns effectively. The classification of individual ML techniques is presented in Table 3.

Table : Classification result.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Classifier | Accuracy | Precision\_macro | Recall\_macro | F1\_macro |
| NB | 0.34 | 0.41 | 0.39 | 0.30 |
| k-NN | 0.53 | 0.36 | 0.38 | 0.36 |
| Decision Tree | 0.44 | 0.36 | 0.47 | 0.33 |
| LR | 0.48 | 0.33 | 0.34 | 0.33 |
| LDA | 0.44 | 0.31 | 0.31 | 0.31 |
| AdaBoost | 0.39 | 0.27 | 0.28 | 0.27 |
| GB | 0.46 | 0.32 | 0.33 | 0.32 |
| SVM | 0.45 | 0.16 | 0.30 | 0.21 |
| RF | 0.55 | 0.38 | 0.39 | 0.37 |

In analyzing the model's performance, the plotted confusion matrices, as shown in Figure 3, provide a visual representation of its classification accuracy, revealing the interplay between true positives, true negatives, false positives, and false negatives (Chicco et al., 2021).

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Figure : Confusion matrices of classification.

To counter the imbalance in our dataset, we opted for a binary approach, merging classes 0 and 1 to create a more balanced representation (Harangi et al., 2020). Therefore, we got class 0 (“not successful”) with 45 (50.6%) and class 1 (“neutral”) with 44 (49.4%) representations. With this approach, all algorithms, except RF and k-NN, performed fair. GB performed the best, with moderate accuracy (0.59 averaged F1-score), as shown in Table 4 and Figure 4.

Table 4: Classification result of the binary case.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Classifier | Accuracy | Precision\_macro | Recall\_macro | F1\_macro |
| NB | 0.54 | 0.54 | 0.54 | 0.51 |
| k-NN | 0.5 | 0.49 | 0.5 | 0.49 |
| Decision Tree | 0.56 | 0.58 | 0.56 | 0.55 |
| LR | 0.54 | 0.54 | 0.54 | 0.53 |
| LDA | 0.55 | 0.55 | 0.55 | 0.54 |
| AdaBoost | 0.55 | 0.55 | 0.55 | 0.54 |
| GB | 0.59 | 0.59 | 0.59 | 0.59 |
| SVM | 0.58 | 0.59 | 0.58 | 0.56 |
| RF | 0.49 | 0.48 | 0.49 | 0.48 |

A screenshot of a diagram

Description automatically generated

Figure : Confusion matrices for the binary case.

In addition, we conducted ML algorithms with a reduced set of predictor variables, as previously discussed. Specifically, we excluded all six variables related to the psychological profile of students within our sample. Omitting psychological variables did not significantly affect performance, as shown in Table 5 and Figure 5. The omission of psychological variables did not lead to a significant impact on the models, and they exhibited similar predictive accuracy. This underscores the robustness of the models even in the absence of these psychological variables in our predictive modeling framework.

Table 5: Classification results with selected features.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Classifier | Accuracy | Precision\_macro | Recall\_macro | F1\_macro |
| NB | 0.34 | 0.4 | 0.38 | 0.28 |
| k-NN | 0.54 | 0.37 | 0.39 | 0.37 |
| Decision Tree | 0.54 | 0.42 | 0.41 | 0.41 |
| LR | 0.49 | 0.32 | 0.35 | 0.33 |
| LDA | 0.46 | 0.31 | 0.33 | 0.31 |
| AdaBoost | 0.37 | 0.28 | 0.39 | 0.31 |
| GB | 0.52 | 0.4 | 0.42 | 0.39 |
| SVM | 0.52 | 0.35 | 0.37 | 0.35 |
| RF | 0.52 | 0.36 | 0.36 | 0.34 |

A screenshot of a graph

Description automatically generated

Figure : Confusion matrices with dropped variables regarding student psychological profile.

Given the suboptimal performance of our model, we employed t-SNE analysis to visually explore and comprehend the underlying patterns and relationships within the data, aiming to uncover potential complexities or overlaps that might have impacted the model's performance (Bibal et al., 2023). The results suggest that distinguishing patterns between classes is challenging, supporting our earlier speculation. Notably, some separation between class 0 and class 1 becomes visible in three-dimensional space. Detailed two- and three-dimensional t-SNE visualizations are provided in Supplementary Figure 6 and Figure 7.

## Discussion

Research shows various small-group learning methods should be considered in teaching (S. Wang et al., 2023), as they promote academic achievement (Kalaian et al., 2018) as well as a positive attitude towards learning (Gaudet et al., 2010; Hillyard et al., 2010). In this regard, tandem learning (Stickler & Emke, 2011; G. Wilson & Blednick, 2011) is an easy-to-implement method. Not everyone responds well to a one-size-fits-all method, and therefore, uncovering insights for predictive model selection tailored to individual students or classrooms becomes imperative for teaching institutions. Customizing the approach to accommodate individual students or classrooms is crucial for educational institutions, as a uniform method may not resonate with everyone (Ahmad et al., 2021; Pratt, 2002). Extracting valuable insights from the educational dataset requires the application of data mining techniques. Given the potential complexity of the relationships between various factors, machine learning methods are considered the most appropriate (Hilbert et al., 2021).

In this study, we used nine ML algorithms, specifically (1) NB, (2) k-NN, (3) Decision Tree, (4) LR, (5) LDA, (6) AdaBoost, (7) GB, (8) SVM, and (9) RF to predict the success of tandem in three-states of tandem learning dataset comprising of 89 students with 14 variables in various (continuous, categorical and ordinal) forms. Models performed poorly to fairly. The best accuracy and F1 score were achieved when the target variable was transformed into two states, however, performance was still not the best. Considering variable importance, the model did not improve significantly. Best models of classification were not consistent, which emphasizes that certain algorithms are more suited to a particular problem (Alzubi et al., 2018), as well as the metric chosen for model evaluation (Erickson & Kitamura, 2021).

An important limitation of using ML in educational contexts is the issue of interpretability, particularly when employing complex models such as ensemble methods or support vector machines. These models often function as “black boxes,” offering limited insight into the decision-making processes behind their predictions. This poses a challenge in educational settings, where transparency is crucial for trust and practical application. Although we explored feature importance and t-SNE visualizations to aid interpretability, further work grounded in explainable AI (XAI) approaches is needed to ensure that such models can provide meaningful, actionable insights for educators and stakeholders.

While the study provides an initial exploration into the predictive modeling of tandem learning outcomes, the overall performance of the ML algorithms was limited—particularly in the three-class classification task. These modest results suggest that the available predictors, sample size, or the inherent complexity of student response patterns may not be fully captured by the models used. As such, the findings do not yet support strong conclusions regarding the applicability of tailored instructional strategies based on ML predictions. However, for the implementation of results, we would like the models to be more accurate and consistent, therefore, more insight regarding the variables used is needed for model improvement. Based on the results of the present research, we suggest researchers investigate the utilization of ML algorithms to measure the effectiveness of specific methodologies by applying different algorithms, which might perform very differently in different situations. Therefore, from the findings of the present research, we cannot state that there is a single ML method that should be preferred, nor that the description of the effectiveness of tandem learning might be described using the sole 13 predictors we employed in the present study. Nevertheless, the study highlights that some ML algorithms had fair accuracies, therefore, their utilization for the assessment of pedagogical practices is encouraged.

The application of supervised machine learning in predicting student response to tandem learning poses significant ethical challenges. While leveraging various general, psychological, and tandem learning-specific variables enhances predictive accuracy, it raises concerns regarding privacy, bias, and informed consent (Akgun & Greenhow, 2022; Starke et al., 2021). Collecting and analyzing personal data to predict individual behavior may compromise students' privacy, requiring strict adherence to data anonymization and consent protocols. Moreover, the inclusion of variables like cultural background or learning styles may inadvertently perpetuate biases or stereotypes (Marinucci et al., 2023). Transparency in model development, interpretability, and ongoing evaluation to mitigate biases remain pivotal.

## Conclusions and limitations

This study explores the use of machine learning algorithms to estimate whether students might respond positively to a specific instructional method—tandem learning—in mathematics education. While the application of AI in education holds promise, especially for personalizing teaching strategies, the findings of this study highlight the current limitations of such models in reliably predicting student outcomes. The modest performance of most algorithms suggests that either the available data or the nature of the learning context may not have been sufficient for strong predictive accuracy. Further research is required to identify the key features that drive successful model performance in this domain.

The overall classification performance of the models was weak, with most algorithms performing only marginally better than random guessing. Several factors may explain the poor model performance. First, while the dataset included variables related to personality traits, emotional and motivational profiles, and perceived interaction quality, it lacked domain-specific variables directly tied to mathematical content knowledge or skill development. This absence likely limited the models’ capacity to capture relevant predictors of learning outcomes in a mathematics-specific context. Future research should prioritize the inclusion of such domain-relevant features (e.g., problem-solving accuracy, prior math performance, or task-level engagement) to improve predictive accuracy.

Second, the study does not evaluate the overall effectiveness of tandem learning itself, but rather examines the feasibility of predicting individual responses to it, based on a limited set of features. Thus, interpretations of the results should avoid overgeneralization.

Third, the relatively small sample size restricts generalizability and limits the statistical power of the analysis. In ML contexts, small datasets pose a risk of overfitting, where the model learns patterns specific to the training data that do not generalize to unseen data (Ying, 2019). This is especially problematic for complex models such as ensemble algorithms, which require substantial data to avoid fitting noise. While we applied cross-validation, regularization, and feature selection techniques to mitigate these risks, these methodological safeguards cannot fully compensate for the limitations of a small and imbalanced dataset.

Additionally, class imbalance in the target variable—particularly the relatively low number of students reporting unsuccessful experiences with tandem learning—may have biased the models toward the majority class, thereby inflating accuracy metrics. Alternative performance metrics such as precision, recall, and F1-score were considered, but these too remained low, confirming the limited discriminative power of the models.

Taken together, these findings should be interpreted as a preliminary step in exploring ML applications within collaborative pedagogies such as tandem learning. Future studies should aim to (1) increase dataset size and diversity to enhance model generalizability and robustness, (2) include domain-specific cognitive and behavioral metrics, (3) address class imbalance using appropriate resampling or weighting techniques, and (4) establish clearer theoretical links between predictors and learning mechanisms.

## Supplementary material

A diagram of a graph

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Figure : Two-dimensional t-SNE plot illustrating the clustering and overlap between student response classes.

A diagram of a graph

Description automatically generated

Figure : Three-dimensional t-SNE plot showing partial separation between class 0 and class 1, suggesting better differentiation in higher-dimensional space.

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