THE EMPLOYMENT OF A LANGUAGE EXCHANGE WEBSITE FOR TANDEM LANGUAGE LEARNING: EFL LEARNERS' VIEWPOINTS

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ABSTRACT

Benefits of tandem language learning have been exposed by some researchers. Conventional tandem exchange language learning usually requires two native speakers to meet face-to-face in order to learn each other's language. Yet, it is not that easy to find native speakers to practice with. The aims of this study are to investigate whether a particular language website (italki) is capable to facilitate tandem language learning in distance language education (DLE) based on EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' viewpoints, to find out whether the language exchange activity provides opportunity for negotiation of meaning and lastly, to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the website. 10 participants majoring English at university level were involved in this study. They were given questionnaire to examine their viewpoints on the language exchange website. The result shows that italki is user-friendly and has helpful language learning features. Negotiation of meaning also occurs in one-to-one e-tandem language exchange activity. The most significant weaknesses of italki is the lack of chat features, so learners need to use other social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc) or applications (Skype, etc) to chat with native speakers. Regardless of its weaknesses, italki is capable to facilitate tandem language learning since it helps learners to find and connect with native speakers easily without requiring them to meet face-to-face.

Keywords: *Tandem language learning, Language exchange website, Distance Language Education (DLE), Native speaker, Viewpoints*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of The Study

Learning a target language from its native speakers is considered as one of the best ways to support acquisition of the target language. Native speakers can be good models in pronouncing words, correcting grammar, and so forth.

Yet, it is not that easy to find native speakers to practice with. It also requires much money to hire native speakers to teach in schools or other institutions. Not everyone can afford the cost of studying from native speakers because it is rather expensive.

Tandem language learning is present to answer such need. With tandem language learning, learners do not have to pay for native speakers to be their language partners, but they have to teach their own native language in exchange. In other words, Indonesian EFL learners can learn English from native speakers for free, but they have to help English native speakers to learn or practice Bahasa Indonesia in return.

Benefits of tandem language learning have been exposed by some researchers. Calvert (1999) states in his study, tandem language learning is a form of language learning in which two people having different native languages work simultaneously in pairs in order to: (1) learn more about each other's character and culture; (2) help each other enhance their language skills and (3) exchange knowledge. In other words, by exchanging each other's native language, learners are not only studying the target language, but also exchanging each other's knowledge and cultures.

Furthermore, communicating with native speakers of a target language reciprocally and constantly also promotes negotiation of meaning. Long (1996) argues, during conversational interaction a language learner receives feedback from his/her language partner. When both learners interact, they often give each other feedbacks by correcting the earlier linguistic form, conversational structure, message content, or all of them, until an adequate level of understanding is reached.

Conventional Tandem Language Learning usually requires learners and native speakers to meet face-to-face in order to exchange their languages. Nowadays, Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL)-based language exchange websites have been emerging. These websites seems to make an attempt to help learners find and connect with native speakers easily in order to exchange and learn each other's languages. However, these websites are quite new and still limited. Not many people know and actually use it to learn English or any other target languages, whereas this can be a great alternative to learn the language from its native speakers in fun and affordable way.

1.2 Problem Formulation

The problems of this research are as follow:
1. What are present generation of a language exchange website is really capable to facilitate tandem language learning without requiring learners and native speakers to meet face-to-face based on Indonesian EFL learners' viewpoints?
2. How language exchange activity using the means of internet or e-tandem language learning offers opportunities for negotiation of meaning in English-Indonesian e-tandem
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the language exchange website, all based on EFL learners' viewpoints as the ones who will be benefited from this study?

1.3 Aims of The Study

The aims of this study are:
1. To highlights whether the present generation of a language exchange website is really capable to facilitate tandem language learning without requiring learners and native speakers to meet face-to-face based on Indonesian EFL learners' viewpoints. Viewpoint means a person's opinion or

point of view (Oxford Dictionary).

2. To investigating whether language exchange activity using the means of internet or e-tandem language learning offers opportunities for negotiation of meaning in English-Indonesian e-tandem.

3. To finding out the strengths and weaknesses of the language exchange website, all based on EFL learners' viewpoints as the ones who will be benefited from this study.

1.4 Previous Research

Dunkley (2006) has done a study about autonomous foreign language-learning, that is, face-to-face tandem language learning at a university at the United Kingdom. The result shows that this autonomous face-to-face tandem language learning project was successful. It was successful because it was based on a principle of autonomy, well-designed course and professionally managed.

Acar & Kobayashi (2011) also have done a similar study. This study highlights the common patterns in real life and face-to-face language exchange encounters between Japanese and English speakers. The aim of this study was to explore the primary factors influencing language exchange (tandem) activities for Japanese learners of English such as motivations of Japanese learners engaging in the language exchange activity, the typical course of the language exchange meetings. The researchers have discovered that most of them interested in tandem language learning because they want to gain communication experience with foreigners. Language exchange partners switch languages between Japanese and English randomly. They rarely follow a lesson plan and hardly ever correct pronounciation and grammar mistakes.

1.5 Position of Study

While both of the previous studies conducted by Dunkley (2006) and Acar and Kobayashi (2011) focus on examining face-to-face tandem language learning, the present study attempts to bridge the gap of the previous studies by examining tandem language learning in distance language education (DLE).

1.6 Scope of The Study

After reviewing a number of language exchange websites, the writer determined that *italki* (italki.com) fits the writer's research objectives the best. This decision was influenced by language learning and language exchange features offered by the website. There are four language learning main features that the writer focuses to be examined: *Language Partners, Notebook, Questions and Answers, and Discussion.*

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is any kind of research that produces whose findings are not obtained from the means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and instead, the kind of research that produces findings arrived from real-world settings where the "phenomenon of interest unfold naturally" (Patton, 2001). Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 2009).

2.2 Analysis of Qualitative Data

Miles and Huberman (1994) break down the analysis of qualitative data into three processes which are not sequential steps, but which happen at the same time and happen over and over again. This

quick guide is organized around these four processes: 1) collecting data, 2) reducing data, 3) displaying data, and 4) drawing and verifying conclusions as describe in Figure 1.
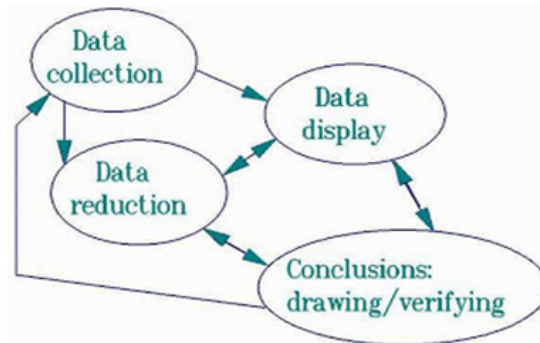

Figure 1. M&H's Components of Data Analysis

2.3 Italki

Italki is an online destination for language learning and language exchange. The company is registered in Hong Kong with a development center in Shanghai, China. *Italki* was founded by American and Chinese entrepreneurs. Membership on italki is free, but they can upgrade their membership to be paid members. Free members can still use all language learning features available on *italki* except professional lessons and informal tutoring. Therefore the writer focuses on the four free features to examine: Language Partners, Notebook, Question and Answers, and Discussion.

2.4 Tandem Language Learning

Cziko (2004) defines tandem language learning as language-based communication between two learners who speak different native languages and who aim to learn each other's native language as a second language (L2). Additionally, Cziko (2004) in his study argues that tandem language learning brings innovation and original immersion to an old-fashioned foreign language curriculum that is still being used in most colleges and universities. He also argues that conventional methods provide a limited language learning environment.

Tandem at a distance usually using electronic media such as e-mail, telephone, chat, video conferencing, and other websites or applications that help them to communicate and learn without having to meet face-to-face is called e-tandem language learning (Cziko, 2014).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

Qualitative research was employed in this study. Qualitative research can provide insight which is not possible to elucidate with purely quantitative methods. After reviewing a number of language exchange websites, the writer determined that *italki* (italki.com) fits the writer's research objectives the best. This decision was influenced by language learning and language exchange features offered by the website.

3.2 Population and Sample

The research populations were students of English literature department. Population is a group who shares the same characteristics. For example, a population can be members of a club, nurses, student or children (Wilkinson, 2000). The research samples were ten Indonesian students of English department at a university with differ-

rent proficiency levels. Five of them were students from regular program and the other five were students from accelerated program. They mostly have never heard about tandem language learning nor *Italki* before.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

To examine learners' viewpoints towards the use of a language exchange website to facilitate Tandem Language Learning the procedures are as follows:

1. Searching for a language exchange website that has a quite lot of members, innovative language learning features, and low/free cost using the help of Google search engine. The writer determined that *italki* (italki.com) fits her research objectives the best.
2. Contacting participants and making an appointment to meet them in person.
3. Meeting the participants in person to give them a verbal explanation about tandem language learning and *italki*.
4. Asking participants to register themselves on *italki* and to use the website on their own within a month.
5. Giving the participants questionnaires to know their experiences and viewpoints towards the use of the language exchange website to facilitate Tandem Language Learning.
6. Asking the participants that have performed one-to one

language exchange to save their chat logs with the native speakers and send the chat logs to the writer.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

Based on M&H's components of data analysis in Figure 1, the data analysis procedures in this research are as follows:
1. Collecting the data by giving the participants questionnaires and asking to send their chat logs.
2. Reviewing the data a few times over so that the writer gets familiar with the data and reducing the data by sorting the valid and invalid data.
3. Displaying the data using tables. A display is an organized and compressed collection of information that permits conclusion drawing (Miles and Huber man, 1994).
4. Drawing some conclusions and verifying them.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result in this study devided into two main result, which is result of the study ease of registering and ease of use, and language learning features.

4.1 Result of The Study Ease of Registering and Ease of Use
4.1.1 Result Ease of Registering

The following Table 1 is the result of learners' viewpoints towards the ease of registering of italki.

Participant	Length of Time for Registering
Participant A	1.34 minutes
Participant B	1.30 minutes
Participant C	1.39 minutes
Participant D	0.49 seconds
Participant E	1.18 minutes

Table 1. Ease of Registering

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Participant	Length of Time for Registering
Participant F	2.04 minutes
Participant G	1.00 minute
Participant H	2.14 minutes
Participant I	1.36 minutes
Participant J	1.00 minute

Generally, registering on *italki* is quite easy. It can be seen from the length of time that the participants need to register themselves, only ranging from 0.49 seconds to 2.14 minutes. They mostly didn't find any difficulties when registering themselves on *italki* except participant I. She had a little problem with her email after registering herself but it could be solved right away.

4.1.2 Result Ease of Use

Ease of use here refers to the entire appearance and features on the website. The following Table 2 is the result of learners' view-points towards the ease of use of italki.

Table 2. Ease of Use

Participants	Comments
Participant A	*'The appearance is quite attractive and easy to use.'*
Participant B	*'It is easy to use because it looks like Facebook and Twitter.'*
Participant C	*'It is really easy to use, because it is similar to facebook and twitter.'*
Participant D	*'Italki's appearance is interesting and simple. It makes meeasier to learn through the website.'*
Participant E	*'It is interesting and easy to use, but I still find some difficulties to find discussions/ notebooks that are written in Bahasa Indonesia.'*
Participant F	*'The appearance is simple. There are no difficulties to use it. Administrators are also available to help me use the website properly.'*
Participant G	*'The appearance makes it easier for me to learn through the website and it is very simple. The features are also easy to use.'*
Participant H	*'This website is very easy to use, efficient, and attractive. It also makes me addicted to use it over and over again.'*
Participant I	*'It is easy to use because the way of using it is similar to other social media.'*
Participant J	*'Easy to use. I can even access it on my mobile phone.'*

All participants think *italki's* appearance and features are simple, attractive and easy to use. The appearance is almost similar to other famous social media like Facebook and Twitter and thus makes them feel familiar with it.

4.2 Language Learning Features

As mentioned in Capture 1, there are four main features that the writer focuses to be examined, they are Language Partners, Notebook, Questions and Answers, and Discussion.

4.2.1 Language Partners

The following Table 3 is the learners' viewpoints on language partners of italki.

Table 3. Learners' Viewpoints on *Language Partners* Feature

Participants	Comments
Participant A	*'It helps me to find native speakers to be my language partners easily.'*
Participant B	*'It sure helps me to find native speakers easily.'*
Participant C	*'It helps me to find native speakers to be my language partners easily.'*
Participant D	*'Language partner is very helpful because it allows us to find native speakers according to our preferences.'*
Participant E	*'It is very helpful to find native speakers and make friends with them.'*
Participant F	*'It does help me to find native speakers easily.'*
Participant G	*'The feature helps me to find native speakers easily and I can choose where they are from and also their gender.'*
Participant H	*'It allows me to search native speakers from what they speak and what they are learning, where they are from and living, and their gender.'*
Participant I	*'It helps me to find native speakers easily.'*
Participant J	*'It helps me to find my language partners easily.'*

Overall, all participants think that *Language Partners* feature is helpful because it allows them to find native speakers to be their language partners easily. They can also customize their search to their preferences. Participants can choose native speakers from what they speak and what they are learning, where they are from and living, and also their gender. Thus it helps them to find native speakers easily and more specifically.

4.2.2 Notebook

The following Table 4 is the learners' viewpoints on language partners of italki.

Table 4. Learners' Viewpoint on Notebook Features

Participants	Comments
Participant A	*'Very helpful because we can get corrections from native speakers and vice versa. I mostly got my notes corrected. The corrections are also reliable and easy to understand.*
Participant B	*'It is helpful because we can write something in target language and native speakers can correct our works.'*

Participants	Comments
Participant C	*'Very helpful because it can increase my grammar and writing skills. Native speakers do not only correct my writings, but they also give explanation and example on my mistakes.'*
Participant D	*'Notebook feature is very helpful to improve my writing skill. I mostly get my notes corrected by native speakers and the corrections make it easier for me to understand.'*
Participant E	*'Very helpful because it helps me increase my writing skill. I mostly got my writings corrected, but sometimes the native speakers didn't explain about my mistakes.'*
Participant F	*'Very helpful because many of native speakers corrected my notes, so it helps me improve my writing skill.'*
Participant G	*'Helpful because I practice my writing skill and get my writings corrected by native speakers.'*
Participant H	*'Helpful. Even though my notes were mostly corrected, I found some of them were left without correction too.'*
Participant I	*'Very helpful. I can share my stories, experiences, and culture in this feature. I can also increase my confidence in writing. I mostly got my writings corrected and the correction makes me easier to understand the target language.'*
Participant J	*'Very helpful because it helps me improve my writing skill. My notes were mostly corrected my native speakers.'*

Generally, all the participants think that notebook feature on *italki* is very helpful because they can practice their writing skills by writing notes, and get their notes corrected by native speakers. They also think that they can improve their writing skill and get more confident writing in the target language. Native speakers did not only correct their writing but also gave explanation regarding their corrections so it made participants easier to understand.

4.2.3   Question and Answer
The following Table 5 is the learners' viewpoints on question and answer features of italki.

Table 5. Learners' Viewpoint on Question and Answer Features

Participants	Comments
Participant A	*'Helpful. The answers I got helped me understand what I previously did not understand about the target language.'*
Participant B	*'Helpful because we can ask everything about the target language, but sometimes the answer I got was not the one I expect.'*
Participant C	*'Helpful because when I don't understand something that is related to English, I can directly ask native speakers in this feature. The native speakers gave me responses faster than I expected.'*
Participant D	*'Very helpful. Because it helped me understand what I previously did not understand.'*

Participants	Comments
Participant E	*'Helpful because we can ask native speakers what we do not understand or confused about the target language, and thus help us to learn the target language.'*
Participant F	*'Helpful. I can directly ask native speakers when I don't understand or confused about something related to the target language.'*
Participant G	*'Very helpful because I can ask everything regarding the target language like the grammar etc.'*
Participant H	*'Very helpful because I can ask everything about English and its culture. But sometimes they (native speakers) didn't response my question, so I had to ask another question.'*
Participant I	*'Very helpful. When I asked a question, I usually got responses from more than one native speakers. Those answers enriched my insights but sometimes the different answers from native speakers make me confused.'*
Participant J	*'Helpful. Because when I did not understand or was confused about something related to English, I could ask directly to native speakers in this feature. The answers I got helped me get a better understanding about the target language.*

Overall, the participants think that Question and Answers feature is helpful because it allows them to ask something regarding the target language and its culture. Although participant B thinks that sometimes the answer she got was not really satisfying, the rest of participants think that the answers they got helped them to get a better understanding of the target language.

4.2.4 Discussion

The following Table 6 is the learners' viewpoints on language partners of italki.

Table 6. Learners' Viewpoint on Discussion Features

Participants	Comments
Participant A	*'Discussion feature allows me to express my views on certain issues in the target language, but sometimes people discuss unclear things.'*
Participant B	*'Discussion feature is fun and interesting since you can ask others' views on something, but sometimes they don't give their opinions seriously.'*
Participant C	*'I think it is fun because I can ask people's opinion/views about a certain topic and they give their reasons.'*
Participant D	*'Engaging in a discussion helps me to enrich my insight.'*
Participant E	*'By joining discussion I can express my opinion on a certain issue.'*
Participant F	*'It is interesting because people can give their own views about a certain thing.'*

Participants	Comments
Participant G	*'Discussion feature helps me to learn the target language. I can ask people's opinion about a certain topic like culture, love, etc.'*
Participant H	*'Sometimes people talk about something trivia in the discussion, such as brands ,activities, etc.'*
Participant I	*'This feature is interesting because I can invite other members to give their perspective on some matters.'*
Participant J	*'I like this feature because it allows me to discuss everything such as culture, people's experiences, etc.'*

The participants mostly think that discussion feature is interesting because they can ask other members' views on a certain topic and by reading the various comments on discussion, they can also broaden their insights. Discussion also allows them to express their views on some issues in the target language. However, some participants think that some members on *italki* discuss something unclear, trivia and are not serious in giving their views.

4.3 Language Exchange Quality

Language exchange quality here refers to the ability of participants to perform one-to-one language exchange activity with native speakers. Language exchange quality is described in the following chart.
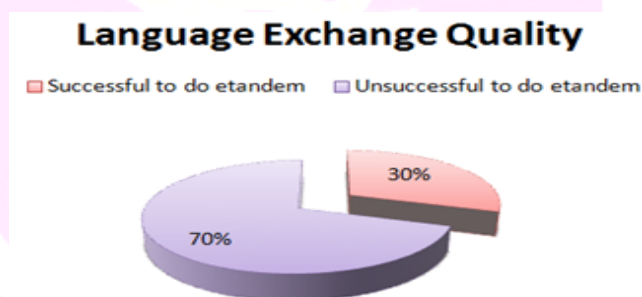

Figure 2. Chart of language exchange quality

Three out of ten participants have successfully performed one-to-one language exchange activity via *Skype* and *Facebook*. They have contacted the native speakers through private message on *italki* and exchanged their *Skype* and/or *Facebook* accounts so that they were able to do one-to-one language exchange activity by chatting with the native speakers.

The writer found that the rest of participants could have been able to perform one-to-one language exchange activity if only they would. The problem was the rest of participants were too shy or busy to contact the native speakers, whereas *italki* has provided a feature to help them find native speakers and contact them via private message.

4.4 Negotiation of Meaning Clarifications Requested By Learners

The following data shows that negotiation of meaning is triggered by learner's clarification requests.

Data 1

Learner (L) : *What are you doing?*

Native speaker (NS) : *I'm supposed to be getting a sign language tutoring session, but think the girl has dropped off the face of the earth. Oh well. What are you up to?*

L : ***What does "dropped off the face of the earth" mean?***

NS : ***Hmm… how to explain... It's when someone disappears, or doesn't show up. You probably won't hear this expression very much.***

L : ***aaahhh I see.***

In this particular learner's session, the conversational flow is interrupted by the need to question particular utterances and request conversational help. The learner requested clarification from the native speaker. The native speaker then explained to the learner until she reached a level of common understanding of the ongoing meaning of the discourse.

4.5 Corrective Feedback Initiated By Native Speakers

Negotiation of meaning is also triggered by corrective feedback (recast) initiated by native speakers.

Data 5

NS : *Aku belajar bahasa Indonesia karena pacarku datang dari Indonesia*

NS : *Mau bisa berbahasa Indonesia sama dia*

NS : *You will definitely master English :)*

NS : *Just need to practice speaking it, and you will get it in no time*

L : *Wow that sounds great that you have a girlfriend from Indonesia*

L : *Are you a businessman?*

L : ***I have an online store, I really interested in business and entrepreneurship.***

NS : ***I am really interested in business and entrepreneurship. :)***

L : ***Oh yes, you are right. I am really interested in business and entrepreneurship.***

In this particular learner's session, when the learner made a mistake, the native speaker did not tolerate it and immediately provide corrective feedback by re-writing the sentence in the correct way. By doing so, the native speaker and the learner have a common understanding on how to write the sentence which is grammatically and logically correct.

From all the data, it is proven that e-tandem language exchange activity offers opportunities for negotiation of meaning. As Nunan (1993) states, negotiation of meaning is interactional work done by speakers and listeners to ensure they have a common understanding of the ongoing meanings of the discourse. Gass and Varonis (1985) also adds that comprehension checks and clarification requests initiated by either NS or learners are also included as signals of negotiation sequences since they point to difficulties in communication and consequent attention to form which promote the modification of learner discourse. Thus language exchange activity does offer opportunities for negotiation of meaning.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

5.1 Conclusion

Based on the previous findings and analysis, it can be concluded that:

1. According to learners' viewpoints, the ease of register-ring and use make italki a user-friendly language exchange website. Language learning features provided on italki are also very helpful. Language Partners feature, for instance,

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according to learners this feature is very helpful because it helps learners to find native speakers to be their language partner easily. They can also customize their search according to their preferences. The next feature is Notebook. Again, learners think that this feature is useful to practice their writing skills. Questions and Answers feature is also useful because learners can directly ask something they do not know or are confused about the target language and get the answers from native speakers. The last one is Discussion. Learners think that this feature is interesting because they can express their views on certain issues in the target language and can invite other members to give their views as well. Italki is capable to facilitate tandem language learning since it helps learners to find and connect with native speakers to be language partners easily to perform one-to-one language exchange activity.

2. E-tandem Language exchange activity also offers opportunities for negotiation of meaning. There are two types of negotiation of meaning that the writer found in this research. The first one is clarifications requested by learners. In the middle of conversations, the learners request clarifications from the native speakers. The native speakers then explain to the learners until they reach a common understanding of the ongoing meanings of the discourse. The second type is corrective feedback (recast) initiated by native speakers. Negotiation of meaning is also triggered by corrective feedback initiated by native speakers. When learners make mistake in the middle of conversations, native speakers do not seem tolerate it and give corrective feedback immediately by re-writing the sentence in the correct way.

3. The most significant thing that the learners think is lacking is chat feature. If *Italki* had chat feature, it would be easier for learners to directly chat with native speakers without requiring them to use other media like Skype, Facebook, or Yahoo messenger.

5.2 Suggestion

Although the writer has attempted to analyze the employment of a language exchange website to facilitate tandem language learning there still is a need for more comprehensive studies that investigate the output of e-tandem language learning; whether learners' language skills are significantly improved after engaging in e-tandem language learning activity.

Readers should also note that the sample in this study was very small and restricted to 10 Indonesian EFL learners at university levels. It would be desirable to replicate these findings with a larger sample size by including subjects of different nationalities or educational levels, using different web sources and also investigating the output of the e-tandem language learning.

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