L2 Students' Comments on Language Exchange Communities in Language Learning

Cem Balçıkanlı

balcikanli@gazi.edu.tr

Abstract

Problem Statement: EFL learners are rarely given opportunities to interact with native speakers and "*…to do something with a language*". In Turkish settings, language learners mostly complain that they do not have enough opportunities to interact with native speakers, and class hours are too limited to acquire a language and more importantly they are not taught expressions that help them express themselves in daily contexts.

Purpose of Study: This study aimed at investigating EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' experiences in a Language Exchange Community, namely xLingo.

Method: 16 students from a state university spent time on language exchange communities. The researcher met these students once a week to make sure that everything was going fine. The students used xLingo for almost six months. The researcher interviewed them through the five questions that were earlier developed and piloted by the researcher himself.

Findings and Results: The findings mostly focused on four aspects namely language development, autonomy, culture and self-confidence.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Given the challenges Turkish EFL learners have to face in the process of language learning, language exchange communities are believed to open up more possibilities for language learners to get more comprehensible input and to interact with more native speakers and more importantly to do something with a language. In order to make best use of these communities, it is a mandatory step that language teachers be introduced to the concept along with practical applications and that these communities should be integrated into language testing system.

Keywords: Language exchange communities, ELT students, language development, autonomy, culture, self-confidence.

Introduction

As Friedman (2005) put it, "flat world" has witnessed a lot of drastic alterations specifically over the last five years. This change has challenged individuals today to keep up with the era in which they live because of these alterations in every part of their lives including different areas and disciplines. Individuals move from a context where libraries used to be renewed every fourteen years in the past to where they handle banking issues via 24/7 open banks through online websites. Similarly, websites such as Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.com) and Wiktionary (www.wiktionary.com) allow their users to access the information within a second. Furthermore, in this flattening world, individuals are even able to shop without going to malls. As seen above, this era has changed a lot of things very drastically because the concept of "Web" is far different from the way it used to be in the past. It was Q'Reilly (2005) who first coined the term "Web 2.0", described as "…user-generated content", which allowed individuals to make use of new technologies in a number of ways. "Social media'', as stated in Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), has become standard activities of all Web enthusiasts, and these activities are nowadays a daily routine of hundreds

of millions. Recent developments in web-based services and the enhancement of collaborative tools have fuelled the demand for similarly-specified educational software and services (Zdravkova, 2010), which creates a demand for individuals to expand their horizons using different technologies. The application of web 2.0 technologies has brought about changes in the way people communicate, receive information, learn and teach.

As far as education is concerned, it is a fact that web technologies are frequently referred in learning/teaching processes. Since the introduction of correspondence education in the 1800s in the USA, educational technology has taken various forms such as television, computer, and finally virtual worlds. Today's students, known also as *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001), *Generation N* (Caldwell, Toman, & Leahy, 2006), *Net Generation* (Toman, Leahy, & Caldwell, 2005), and *Grasshopper Mind* (Raines, 2005), are multi-taskers who do several jobs simultaneously. More importantly, they are technology savvy and confident in the positive value of technology. They believe in the importance of technology as "…an essential and preferred component of every aspect of their lives (US Department, 2004, p. 9). It is a widespread perception that 21st century students contribute to their own learning processes since they make use of technologies very effectively. In order to address these students, it is mandatory that teachers equip themselves with recent technological innovations, which helps facilitate the communication and information sharing between students and teachers.

Language Exposure

Language learning is more than a classroom experience, which makes this point clear that language learners should be engaged with different kinds of learning tasks both in and outside the classroom. However, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts do not offer many possibilities for language learners to get much exposure to the target language outside the class (Godwin-Jones, 2005; Nesi, 1999; Patten & Craig, 2007; Zychla, 2007). It is mainly

because class hours are not able to provide language learners with sufficient number of opportunities to use the language in authentic settings. Therefore, EFL learners are rarely given opportunities to interact with native speakers and "*…to do something with a language*" (Grundy, 2001). Similarly, in Turkish settings, language learners mostly complain that they do not have enough opportunities to interact with native speakers, that class hours are too limited to acquire a language and more importantly they are not taught expressions that help them express themselves in daily contexts (Güney & Erten, 2010). Baş (2010) also underlines this important issue in his study he carried out on the use of Dyned in the schools of Ministry of National Education. Turkish language learners fail to exploit what they study during class hours in their own daily lives. At this point, there seems to be a consensus that recent technologies offer the following possibilities: (1) new opportunities for learners to take more control of their learning and access their own customized information, resources, tools and services, (2) a wider range of expressive capability, (3) more collaborative ways of working, community creation, dialogue and sharing knowledge, (4) a setting for learner achievements to attract an authentic audience, (5) a venue for language learners to be engaged in authentic language. More specifically, online learning gives language learners control over the selection of materials and over the strategies to use, and of course independent action (Benson, 2001). Many foreign language educators have looked to the potential of networked technologies to enhance and supplement the traditional activities of the communicative classroom, which are often seen as limited and over-focussed on the exchange of information (Black & Cameron, 2001; Greenfell, 2000; Jarvis, 2004; Wollf, 1999). In light of five benefits that web technologies offer, it is more than a necessity that web technologies be employed at the service of language learning as frequently as possible. To this end, language exchange communities are described as online communities where language learners have the chance of practicing their target languages with native speakers synchronously. These

communities are believed to hone learners' language skills as well as to develop an awareness of their own language learning. What is more, language exchange communities may help language learners to be familiar with the target culture and to display more autonomous skills in their own learning paths. In this regard, this study reports on research focusing on language exchange communities (xLingo) that provide appropriate frameworks for more independent and more real-life-like learning experiences of EFL students in a Turkish university.

Methodology

This study investigated EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' experiences in a Language Exchange Community, namely xLingo. The participants were ELT (English Language Teaching) freshmen studying in a state university in Turkey. They were enrolled in the class "Effective Communication Skills" in the fall semester of 2010-2011 academic year. At the very beginning of the semester, the researcher introduced the concept of "language exchange communities" to the 25 participating students with a PowerPoint presentation. During the presentation, the researcher underlined the basic aspects of language exchange communities as well as their practical applications.

xLingo is a social networking site designed for language learners. The xLingo enables its users to create real world language use in language classrooms with native speakers using Skype. The site has very same functionalities as Facebook. To exemplify, it has blogs, friend requests, and a messaging system. Nonetheless, what makes it different is that users seek potential language partners based on their native language and the language they are studying. The xLingo also includes functions for foreign language teachers. Teachers can search for other teachers interested in class-to-class exchanges. They can organize and oversee their students' blog posts. Beside, they can organize events where native speakers are invited to contact students in their class via Skype at a specific time. With more than 40,000 xLingo users, it is now possible for any language teacher to organize a language exchange for

their students at almost any time. This is especially helpful for less commonly taught languages in Asia and the Middle East where time differences make most traditional class-to-class exchanges very difficult.

The participants were expected to visit this social networking site at least twice a week as a component of their class. Out of 25 students, 16 of them continued spending time on language exchange communities. The researcher met these 16 students once a week to make sure that everything was going fine. During these meetings, the students mostly talked about how they could start up the conversation, what kind of topics they were expected to discuss and the technical difficulties they encountered. It was decided after the first meeting that the researcher guided students to decide the topics they were going to discuss with native speakers of English. The students used xLingo for almost six months. Six months later, the researcher interviewed them through the five questions that were earlier developed and piloted by the researcher himself. The interview questions were as follows: 1) Is it *(xLingo)* easy to use? 2) Is it interesting? Why? 3) Is it good for English practice? How? 4) How does it contribute to your independent skills? 5) What other special features does it have?. The interviews were videotaped. The researcher himself and another researcher watched the recordings twice to come up with the underlying themes. After a rigorous study, they worked on the underlying themes to categorize them as the findings of the research.

Findings and Discussion

Overall, the participating students considered xLingo to be very easy to use since it looks like "Facebook", all of whom visit at least once a day. The interface of the web site, according to students, was very interesting and it allowed students to employ this community with a great enthusiasm. The findings of the study indicated that language learners' experiences in language exchange communities focused on four aspects, namely (1) language

development, (2) autonomy, (3) culture and /4) self-confidence (see table 1 for a detailed review).

Aspects mentioned during the interview	Participants (n)
A great contribution to language development (including mostly speaking, listening, using daily expressions)	15
A great tool to exercise learner autonomy	14
A forum for cultural exchange	12
A less-threatened environment for language learning	14

Table 1

Students' perceptions of xLingo application

Language Development

It was quite obvious that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners made use of xLingo a lot more than they had earlier considered. Given the constraints on time spent on English, overwhelming majority of the participants (95%) reported that language exchange communities increased the level of English exposure, which is in tune with Krashen's comprehensible input (1981). In the Turkish context, like in all other EFL contexts, language learners are rarely given opportunities to practice the target language as frequently as they should. Language exchange communities, according to most participants (%90), seemed to solve this problem in a way that provided students with chances at practicing and more importantly using the language in a daily-like context. There is much evidence suggesting that EFL learners around the globe are lack of daily expressions (O'Malley, 1994; Sharples, 2002). In a similar fashion, not many Turkish EFL learners are able to communicate with

native speakers in a natural way including daily expressions such as *"Have a good one!"*, *"What's up? Not much!", and "I am off home!".*

> *I can learn daily expressions through this website (Learner C).*
>
> *Expressions that I see in How I met your mother, Chuck, Two and a half men, and similar shows on CNBC-E, I hear people use them a lot (Student F).*

As would be seen in the remark made by a student, xLingo created opportunities for students to be able to employ expressions mentioned above. In other words, students had an opportunity to use these expressions they heard in TV shows. Another important contribution of xLingo to students' language skills is that xLingo worked as a source of information concerning the English language in a way.

> *Whenever I had some doubts about the use of a particular expression or idiom, I found answers for them at once. For example, once I was trying to come up with an idiomatic expression like "Not even flies come by!" (sinek avlıyoruz). Michael, a friend of mine on xLingo helped me with that (Student B).*

This statement indicated that students were given possibilities to interact with native speakers for unknown words and expressions. xLingo, in this regard, functioned as a platform where students could learn more about English in an interactive sense.

> *Now I know how much I know, how I can maintain a conversation with a native speaker, and how to continue and end up a conversation (Student A).*

The final benefit of xLingo in terms of language development was that students had a chance at learning "how to begin, continue and terminate a conversation" in daily contexts. Students

believed that their language learning experiences lacked of such abilities because of a more-structuralist view of language learning. This finding is highly critical as a great deal of research shows that EFL learners are deprived of these abilities. It is, then, believed that language exchange communities might offer specific solutions to this problem because they are in involved in more natural conversations.

Autonomy

In conjunction with recent online learning developments in language learning, multimedia applications provide learners with effective means to make language acquisition/learning more viable and more independent (Nesi, 1998; Raya & Fernandez, 2001; Warschauer, Turbee & Robert, 1996; Wolff, 1999; Wolff & GroB, 2001). The students reported that they took responsibility for their own learning, spending so much time online doing language-related tasks.

> *You can only learn some in class, so tools outside the classroom are important. Xingo helps me learn more English outside the class. More importantly, I do know that I am not as good at pronunciation as I should. To overcome this, I used online dictionaries and other resources that help develop my listening skills as well (Student C).*

As one of the students mentioned during the interviews, xLingo was crucial in that it enabled students to take responsibility for their own learning by giving endless opportunities to exercise their autonomy. Searching the relevant information to communicate with native speakers of English, students' autonomous skills greatly developed. This is in line with Benson (2001, p. 138-140), who believes that "online learning offers learning offers rich linguistic and non-linguistic input, by presenting new language through a variety of media and by offering branching options", which give students control over the selection of materials and over the strategies to use, and of course independent action.

Culture

Culture and language have strong ties with each other. It is hardly possible to distinguish one from another (Alptekin, 2002). At this point, mention should be made of cultural issues, which play a key role in the process of learning a foreign language. Culture in a way encourages language learners to learn the target language. Students regarded culture exchange as an important contribution of xLingo to their language skills. That is to say, during two-way interaction between Turkish and students from other nationals, they exchanged specific information related to their cultures.

> *It was quite interesting to see that we are very similar to each other even though we live far away. I did not know there is an idiomatic expression in English like "he spends money like water (Su gibi para harcıyor). Or, thanksgiving and our bayrams are much too alike (Student G)*

As one of the students expressed above, xLingo served as a cultural bridge where students could easily exchange their cultural frames. More specifically, they were focusing on similar cultural frames that encouraged them to more exchange information, thus to use the language.

Self-Confidence

As most research underlines, anxiety plays a key role in the success of language learning. Contrary to expectations, most of the students felt less nervous when they were using xLingo for their language learning mainly because they were not leading a face-to-face interaction. Specifically in EFL contexts language learners do not feel at ease enough to speak with native speakers because this is not what they frequently do outside the class. They are mostly reported to feel nervous whenever they need to speak to native a speaker, which was revealed in the findings of some research (Price, 1991; Samimy & Rardin, 1994).

Whenever I wanted to speak with a native speaker, something was inhibiting me from doing so. I was looking at them with a blank face, with nothing to say. However, xLingo helped me in a way that reduced my anxiety. It was perhaps because I did not see them. I used to feel relaxed enough to speak (Student I).

As was easily observed in the comment, students felt at ease during the exchange process. Language exchange communities offer less stressful experiences for students to practice the target language than face-to-face communication.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This small-scale study set out to investigate the effectiveness of language exchange communities in language learning. The findings mostly focused on four aspects namely language development, autonomy, culture and self-confidence. (1) The students reported that they had developed their language skills specifically in terms of daily expressions, chances at practicing the language in a daily-like context, opportunities to practice with native speakers for unknown words and expressions, speaking and listening skills. (2) The language learners took responsibility for their own learning by making use of different resources such as online dictionaries and listening websites, which enabled them to exercise their autonomous skills. (3) The students made use of xLingo as a cultural exchange platform where they could share their cultural frames with their friends online, which paved the way for the development of cultural issues in language learning. (4) The students mentioned that they were feeling less threatened when they were spending time with their foreign friends online mainly because they were not leading a face-to-face interaction.

Given the challenges Turkish EFL learners have to face in the process of language learning, it is highly believed that language exchange communities have the potential for overcoming at least some of these challenges. Language exchange communities are believed

to open up more possibilities for language learners to get more comprehensible input and to interact with more native speakers and more importantly to do something with a language. In this particular regard, language exchange communities seem to offer more feasible ways for language learners than traditional learning environments. In order to make best use of these communities, it is a mandatory step that language teachers be introduced to the concept along with practical applications. It is the researcher's belief that language learning will be actualized at a higher level if language teachers are aware of these communities and more importantly share these communities with their own students. In line with the assumption that language teachers need to test the way they teach (Alderson & Wall, 1993), language exchange communities should be integrated into language testing system. It would be useless to only lead learners to use language exchange communities without any particular actions. Language teachers should involve language exchange communities in their evaluation system to make the use of these communities more meaningful and viable for language learners.

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Dr. Cem BALÇIKANLI works as a lecturer in the Department of English Language Teaching at Gazi University. He is particularly interested in learner/teacher autonomy, web technologies in language learning/teaching and teaching Turkish as a foreign language. He has presented papers at several conferences and has published in EFL Journals.

Dil Değişim Topluluklarının Dil Öğreniminde Kullanımı Üzerine Öğrenci Görüşleri

Özet

Araştırma Konusu: Yabancı dil öğrenen bireylerin karşılaştıkları sorunların başında, öğrenmeye çalıştıkları dili yeteri kadar kullanamamaları gelmektedir. Sınıflarda geçirilen zamanın kısıtlı olmasının kaçınılmaz bir sonucu olarak, yabancı dil öğrenen bireyler, öğrendikleri dili sınıf dışında geliştirme konusunda yetersiz kalmaktadır. 21. Yüzyılın en önemli yeniliklerinden biri olarak kabul edilen Web teknolojileri, bu tür problemlerle karşı karşıya kalan bireylere sonsuz fırsatlar sunmaktadır. Web 2. 0 teknolojilerinin örneklerinden biri sayılan "Dil Değişim Toplulukları", yabancı dil öğrenen bireylere, öğrendikleri dili, ana dil kullanıcılarıyla geliştirme fırsatı sunmakta ve ilgili kültüre yönelik bir farkındalık kazandırmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, çalışma, Dil Değişim Topluluklarını bir dönem boyunca kullanan yabancı dil öğrencilerinin, bu süreçte yaşadıklarını araştırmaktadır.

Araştırma Yöntemi: Çalışmanın katılımcıları, Türkiye'de bir devlet üniversitesinde İngilizce Öğretmenliği bölümünde okuyan birinci sınıf öğrencileridir. "Etkili İletişim Becerileri" dersinde kendilerine dil değişim topluluklarının tanıtıldığı 25 tane öğrenciden 16sı bir dönem boyunca xLingo isimli dil değişim topluluğunu kullanmıştır. Bu uygulamanın sonucunda 16 öğrenciyle daha önceden hazırlanan ve pilot uygulaması yapılan sorularla görüşme gerçekleştirilmiştir. Kayıt altına alınan görüşmeler, araştırmacı ve bağımsız bir

başka araştırmacı tarafından deşifre edilmiş, ve çalışmanın ana hatlarını ortaya koyan boyutlara ulaşılmıştır.

Bulgular: Çalışmanın sonuçları, öğrencilerin, dil değişim topluluklarını oldukça yararlı, kolay ve ilginç bulduğu yönündedir. Ayrıca, öğrencilerle yapılan görüşmelerin ışığında, bulgular dört ana noktada toplanmaktadır: a) Dil gelişimi: Öğrencilerin, özellikle konuşma ve dinleme becerilerinin geliştiği gözlemlenmiştir. Ayrıca, günlük ifadelerin kazandırılması ve iletişimsel beceriler anlamında dil değişim toplulukları oldukça önemli bir rol oynamıştır. b) Özerklik: Öğrencilerin özerk öğrenmeyi yaşamaları için çeşitli ortamların sağlandığı ve kendi öğrenme sorumluluklarını aldığı sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. c) Kültür: Dil değişim topluluklarındaki etkileşim sonucu, öğrencilerin kültürel konularda bir alışverişe girdiği ve bu alışverişin de öğrencilerin güdülenme seviyesini artırdığı bulgusuna ulaşılmıştır. d) Özgüven: Dil öğrencileri, dil değişim toplulukları sayesinde kurdukları iletişimde, yüz yüze iletişiminden çok daha az gergin olduklarını ifade ederek, dil değişim toplulukların kendilerini özgüvenli hissettirdiklerini belirtmişlerdir.

Sonuç: Türkiye gibi İngilizcenin Yabancı Dil olarak öğretildiği bağlamlarda, dil öğrencilerinin, ana dil kullanıcılarıyla olan etkileşimini artıran dil değişim toplulukları, birçok anlamda faydalı bir web teknolojisi olarak dikkat çekmektedir. Yapılan çalışma, dil öğrencilerinin bu topluluklardan en üst düzeyde yararlandığı sonucuna ulaşmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dil değişim toplulukları, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrenciler, dil gelişimi, özerklik, kültür, özgüven.