

5 ‘It’s a shame that we haven’t met earlier!’: facilitating a tandem language exchange programme at Queen’s University Belfast

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Abstract

Tandem Language Exchanges² (TLE) have been recognised for their pedagogical value in language learning, especially when developing learner autonomy through providing language learning support to each other in a friendly and social learning environment. Unlike many projects which incorporate cross-site practices in a collaborative teaching paradigm, the TLE programme at Queen’s University Belfast aims to support all students and staff who wish to practise with a native speaker of the target language on campus via a platform that facilitates searching, interaction, and socialising functions. Drawing on observation, survey results and self-reports, this study reviews the obstacles to active engagement and reports a case study (Chinese-German) to demonstrate how they felt about their practice and participation. The study concludes with some considerations for implementing this TLE approach as a useful opportunity in complementing formal language learning at university level.

Keywords: tandem language exchange, informal language learning, TLE platform, language partner, social engagement, intercultural exchange.

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2. <http://www.qub.ac.uk/lc/LearningSupport/TLE/>

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1. Introduction

Queen’s University Belfast, like many other universities, has placed great importance on its internationalisation agenda with a vision of becoming a “world class international university that supports outstanding students and staff working in world class facilities, conducting leading-edge education and research focussed on the needs of society” (Queen’s University Belfast³). To this end, a central goal of its education strategy is to “create an educational experience that enriches our students intellectually, socially, and culturally” (Queen’s University Belfast⁴).

The Language Centre exists to provide staff and students with courses, resources, and learning support. Its primary mission is to develop students’ global citizenship through enhancing their foreign language skills as well as their cultural awareness and sensitivity. The TLE programme is an extra-curricular initiative designed to provide language learners with an enhanced study experience within Queen’s multicultural environment.

TLE, at its simplest, refers to reciprocal support and instruction between two learners, each of whom wishes to improve their proficiency in the other’s native language (Appel & Mullen, 2000, p. 291; O’Rourke, 2007). Unlike many TLE projects which incorporate class-to-class or partner-to-partner practices in a well-designed teaching paradigm for language learning or intercultural exchange (Batardière & Jeanneau, 2015; O’Rourke, 2007), this TLE programme provided learners with a free online space that relied on the principles of reciprocity and autonomy (Appel & Mullen, 2000; O’Rourke, 2007). That is, TLE participants at Queen’s did not have to register with a Language Centre course in order to join in this programme.

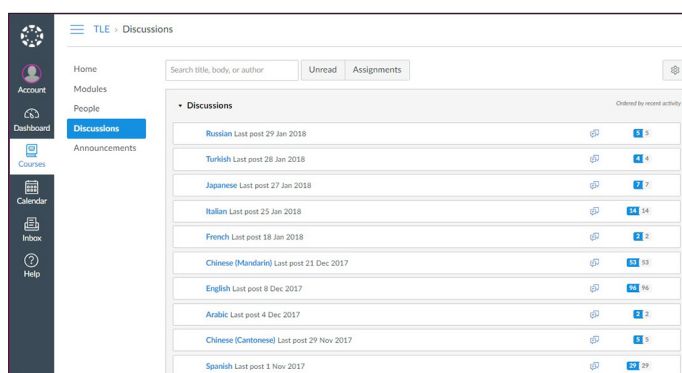
3. <https://www.qub.ac.uk/home/Vision2020/VisionStatement/>

4. <http://www.qub.ac.uk/teachers/Filestore/Filetoupload,756282,en.pdf>

2. What we did

Since its pilot implementation in 2015, we created an online registration form to record the language exchange needs and basic personal information of the participants. Invitation letters were then sent out with instructions to create an account for their online participation. The platform, firstly a university-affiliated blog which did not enable participant interactivity well, was later replaced by CANVAS, an online learning space that allows the creation and delivery of self-designed courses. Structured as a course, the TLE platform assembled all necessary resources labelled as modules (work sheets, safety advice, participant stories, etc.) and tools (calendar, inbox) to help participants develop their partnership. In particular, it embedded language-specific discussion forums that enabled participant presence and interaction (see [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1. The participant view of the TLE platform

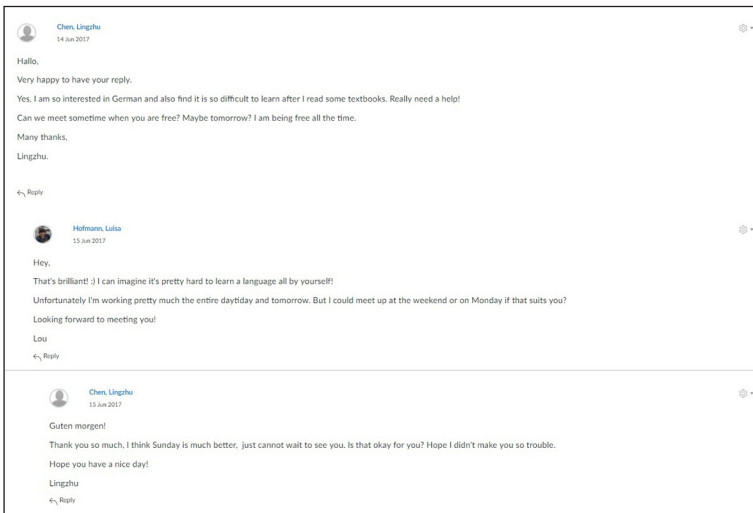


As soon as participants activated their accounts, they were able to advertise their language exchange needs by both writing in their profiles and identifying their native languages, as shown in [Figure 2](#).

For example, English native-speakers would need to introduce themselves by posting in the English forum, regardless of their target languages. Then, they would need to browse through the other language forums to look for potential

language partners and vice versa. However, participants were advised not to post their exchange needs directly in a forum of their target language(s) to avoid confusion. This way, they could afford more than one partnership as long as both sides agreed.

Figure 2. Example of setting up a partnership by participants via the discussion forums



Meetings were scheduled to facilitate the TLE registration and participation throughout the semesters. Usually after the start of the semester, an initial group meeting was arranged to brief the participants, share experiences, and undertake ice-breaking activities, without necessarily partnering with one another on site due to their different availabilities. Monthly meetings were arranged afterwards for on-going support. Updates on TLE activities were circulated by the organiser via announcements in the platform. However, attending the TLE meetings was voluntary. With regard to individual communication, functions such as the inbox and private messages allowed the organiser and participants to email each other. Worksheets (e.g. learning diary template) were also available.

3. Method

Data were collected using an end-of-semester survey and through a set of observations; these data were presented with descriptive analyses to frame the subsequent case study. The programme evaluation survey was sent to the 149 participants who registered with the TLE programme. Due to clashes with the exam period and unreported drop-outs, only 18 participants finally returned their feedback (one incomplete), with a response rate of 12.08%. The questions focussed on their experience of using the TLE service and their perceived benefits and drawbacks of TLE participation. The observation data came from their registration with the TLE platform with regard to native language and target language. The analysis of the case was based on the participants' online participation and a series of follow-up emails.

4. Discussion of outcomes

4.1. The wider context

The survey evaluation revealed that among the 18 respondents, only five had started TLE practice. The rest reported that they had met their partner only once (27.78%) or had not met their partner since joining the programme (44.44%). In all six TLE meetings, only one participant attended three sessions, with ten reporting non attendance. The participants met on average once a week, often in campus areas such as the café or the student lounge. Three main reasons explain the low participation or no participation ([Table 1](#)): heavy workload (58.82%), difficulties to agree a time to meet (41.48%), and no suitable partners (29.41%).

This is consistent with reports from similar studies ([Batardière & Jeanneau, 2015](#)). Compared to the initial registration number, it is not difficult to see that despite the enthusiasm of registering with the programme, non-credit bearing learning could de-motivate participants and failure to find a suitable time to meet could reduce commitment to each other.

Table 1. Main reasons for low participation or no-participation

Answer Choices	Responses
Heavy workload	58.82% (10)
No suitable partners (not the right level, lack of communication, etc.)	29.41% (5)
Difficult to find an agreed time slot (timetable clashes, etc.)	41.18% (7)
Change in circumstances (illness, placement, etc.)	5.88% (1)
Unsure how to get started	17.65% (3)
Other (please specify)	11.76% (2)
Total respondents	17

In addition, a great imbalance between language exchange demands made it problematic for participants to find their ideal language partners. For example, there existed an overall shortage in supply of languages compared to the demand, except for English and Chinese, as shown in Table 2. It is worth noting that the numbers quantitatively matching both ‘native languages’ in supply (e.g. Italian) and ‘target languages’ in demand (e.g. Italian) did not indicate an automatic pairing up.

Table 2. Imbalanced demands in TLE participation

Native languages	Target languages	Native languages	Target languages
Arabic (1)	Arabic (6)	Korean (1)	Korean (8)
Bengali (1)	N/A	Latin (1)	N/A
Catalan (1)	N/A	Chinese (27)	Chinese (8)
Dutch (1)	Dutch (1)	Polish (1)	Polish (1)
French (9)	French (52)	N/A	Portuguese (4)
German (3)	German (23)	Russian (1)	Russian (1)
Greek (2)	N/A	Spanish (7)	Spanish (64)
Irish (1)	Irish (1)	N/A	Swedish (2)
Italian (9)	Italian (9)	Turkish (1)	Turkish (1)
N/A	Japanese (3)	English (88)	English (39)

Regardless of the challenges, those participants with a genuine interest in language learning (e.g. ‘day-to-day conversation’) and intercultural exchange (e.g. ‘meet people’ and ‘understand the culture and the language’) managed to start their TLE, as the case below illustrates.

4.2. A case report: a tale between two TLEers

Lingzhu, a native Chinese student of pharmacy at Queen's since September 2016, registered with the TLE in June 2017. She was unable to register for a German course because of her tight timetable during term time. When she finished most of her research work in May 2017, she decided to learn some German by herself in order to get 'something useful' out of her time before returning to China. Having no specific plan, she found self-study was really challenging without someone to help her and she turned to the TLE programme for support. After posting a greeting message as advised by the organiser, she was quickly contacted by Luisa the next day (see [Figure 2](#)).

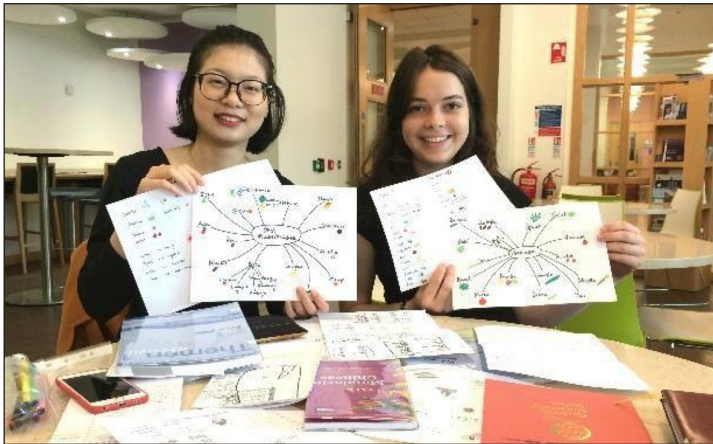
Luisa moved from Nuremberg, Germany, to Belfast in October 2016 for a gap year experience and she registered with the TLE in order to find language partners to further improve her already fluent English, basic French, and Spanish. She said that her first few partnerships were all 'rather one-sided' as the native English speakers 'couldn't teach' her English to the extent that she helped them in German. However, she acknowledged the benefits of learning about the cultural aspects of the local area and the UK in general. Through a consultation email, the organiser advised her to keep her target language learning options open for more opportunities. So she did and found Lingzhu quickly.

They arranged their first face-to-face meeting on Sunday the 18th of June after a few exchanges through the forum discussions. They decided to meet up every other day at the library lounge during the morning hours (see [Figure 3](#)). They tried to spend equal time on German and Chinese practice as much as possible, although they found themselves getting stuck talking about cultural topics even in English. Luisa described their meetings on language exchange as follows:

“Although we both use a book [...] we usually don't use them for our meetings. Most of the time we [...] collect words or phrases in the form of mind maps or tables. We have already been very busy with

vegetables, fruits, food, the weather, the seasons and verbs in German and [...] we've done some basic introduction and greeting phrases, numbers, how to draw Chinese signs and how [...] grammar works. Pronunciation also plays a very important role for us and we try to spend as much time talking and reading as possible" (Luisa, email, 14/07/2017).

Figure 3. Lingzhu and Luisa as TLE partners (published with permissions from the participants)



Likewise, Lingzhu appreciated the social value of making friends for intercultural exchange via the TLE programme. She said:

"Every time Luisa and I meet up, we not only learn [languages] from each other, but also talk about the different culture[s] [...] We talk about the life, the food, hobbies and so on. We go out running, do sports together" (Lingzhu, email, 10/07/2017).

Luisa, while initially having no intention to learn Chinese, thanked Lingzhu for her patience in helping with her pronunciation practice and answering 'silly' questions that she would not attempt with a teacher in class. She also

felt grateful for the chance of learning about Chinese culture much more than she would learn from a book. Echoing Lingzhu's words, she further valued this TLE partnership and beyond, even using a recently learned expression from the organiser:

“What started off as a language partnership soon turned into a real friendship and apart from learning [languages] we also [...] spend time as friends. I'm very grateful [...] and I really hope our friendship and language partnership will last for a long time even though I'm back home in Germany over summer and she goes back to China [...] It's a shame we haven't met earlier! 相见恨晚 (xiāngjiàn hènwǎn)” (Luisa, email, 14/07/2017).

5. Conclusion

This study indicates that a TLE programme like this could be facilitated for participants with different purposes, from developing language skills to fostering friendships. Despite the limitations of this study in terms of scale and size, it is worth suggesting a couple of points for further development.

The key to an effective operation is two-sided. Firstly, in a loosely organised on-campus learning environment, the organiser's dedication to leading and maintaining an active role is as important as the participants' commitment. A mere exposure of contacts via the TLE platform does not necessarily guarantee any sustainable partnerships. A careful process of facilitation and moderation should be rendered to ensure a meaningful exchange, as seen in Luisa and Lingzhu's case. Secondly, it is fundamental that participants invest their time and energy on top of their enthusiasm.

With regard to its further development from the organiser's point of view, it would be ideal that such a participation be officially recognised with an award on top of the participants' degree study or language programme, with evidence provided by learning diaries, for instance. This would, in fact, suggest a joint effort between

student support services and language tutors alike for the implementation, which would likely be the next stage of Queen's TLE programme development.

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**Innovative language teaching and learning at university:
integrating informal learning into formal language education**

Edited by Fernando Rosell-Aguilar, Tita Beaven, and Mara Fuertes Gutiérrez

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