Tandem Language Exchange: An App to Improve Speaking Skill

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Abstract: Technological progression has brought drastic changes in the way second language is taught and learned and there is now a vast number of software and applications designed to facilitate this process. One of the applications that is specially designed for improving the speaking skill is *Tandem Language Exchange*. This application tries to facilitate learning the skill by bringing many language learners together as a big community. Learners can also use the *tutor feature* of the app to connect with professional language teachers. This article aims to provide a review of Tandem Language Exchange application by introducing its main features and its strengths and weaknesses. The review recommends Tandem as a platform for improving the speaking ability of second language learners. The app can also benefit second language teachers.

Keywords: Technology, Application, Tandem, Second Language

Introduction

Researchers working in the area Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) argue that technology, if applied appropriately, can facilitate second language (L2) teaching and learning process. Hoopingarner (2009, p. 222) contends that "Best practices in using technology to support language teaching and learning, see technology as a tool that can enhance teaching and learning by augmenting input, providing additional opportunities for language practice, and serving as a platform for interaction and tasks-based learning activities" (see also Golonka et al., 2014 for a review of different technology types for L2 teaching and learning and their effectiveness). Computer software and mobile applications have also proved to be plausible alternatives for traditional institutional language learning classrooms (Nushi & Jenabzadeh, 2016). Technology has also provided language learners with a unique opportunity to practice the target language not only inside but also outside

the language classrooms through communicating with other learners of the same language or even with native speakers (Odo, 2019). Confirming and expanding that view, TESOL Technology Standards (2008, p. 15) states that the "use of technology in English language teaching and learning can also encourage the development of strategies necessary for modern survival: communication, collaboration, and information gathering and retrieval".

Among the variety of different L2 learning applications, those that are especially designed to improve the speaking skill have drawn more attention. On the one hand, there is a great demand for such software as they give L2 learners the chance to not only learn and practice the skill on their own and at their own pace (and this might also save them time of attending real language classes) but also to reflect on what they have produced at some later time. On the other hand, many L2 teachers are skeptical of the possibility of the computer and mobile technologies replacing "the face-to-face oral production that occurs in the classroom, along with all of the live interactions with the instructor, who represents the students' best model for correct usage" (Blake, 2017, p. 107). That worry can be ameliorated if the skeptics consider the fact developments in computer and particularly mobile technologies (e.g. smart phones, iPads, tablets) are altering the quality of speaking instruction. Equipped with sensitive speakers and microphones, they allow installation of applications that cater to L2 learners' language learning needs, including improving their speaking ability. Such technologies can also benefit classroom instructors as they allow them to offer their students additional help in aural/oral skills (see Hincks, 2003; Kallinikou & Nicolaidou, 2019).

One of the important applications designed for improving speaking skills is Tandem. It helps learners boost their communicative skills by creating a very large community of language learners. Tandem community involves many users who are ready to teach their own languages and learn the target languages from the native speakers. What makes Tandem communication different from traditional classroom communication is the possibility of discussing topics that are interesting to both

sides (i.e. learners and teachers). Due to the friendly and charming atmosphere created by the app, users are not afraid of making mistakes, and they try to learn from what goes on in the exchange of languages. The main reason behind choosing Tandem as the focus of this paper has been its success in helping language learners improve their speaking skill, as indicated by its Google Play rating of 4.5.

Description

Tandem is a language exchange application designed based on the concept of learning through exchanging languages, which has its origin in the 1970s. In other words, Tandem's learning methodology is based on the assumption that a language can be acquired through mutual language exchange between tandem partners (ideally one partner is a native speaker in the particular language that the other partner wants to learn).
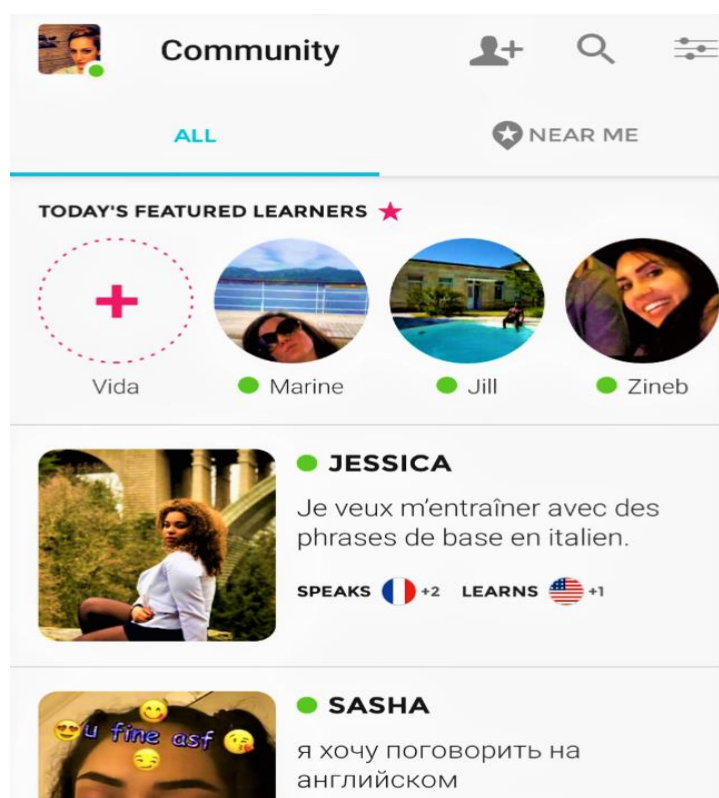
Figure 1. A Screenshot of Tandem Community

The application is a community-based app that enables its users to practice the languages they are interested in one on one via texts, audio recordings, audio calls or

video calls. The app can be downloaded for iOS and Android operating systems on App Store and Google Play respectively. After installing the application, the users must sign in, log in to their accounts and provide some information on who they are and what interests them. Later there would be an approval process through which staff members monitor the users' requests to ensure that the sole reason for their membership in Tandem community is language learning.
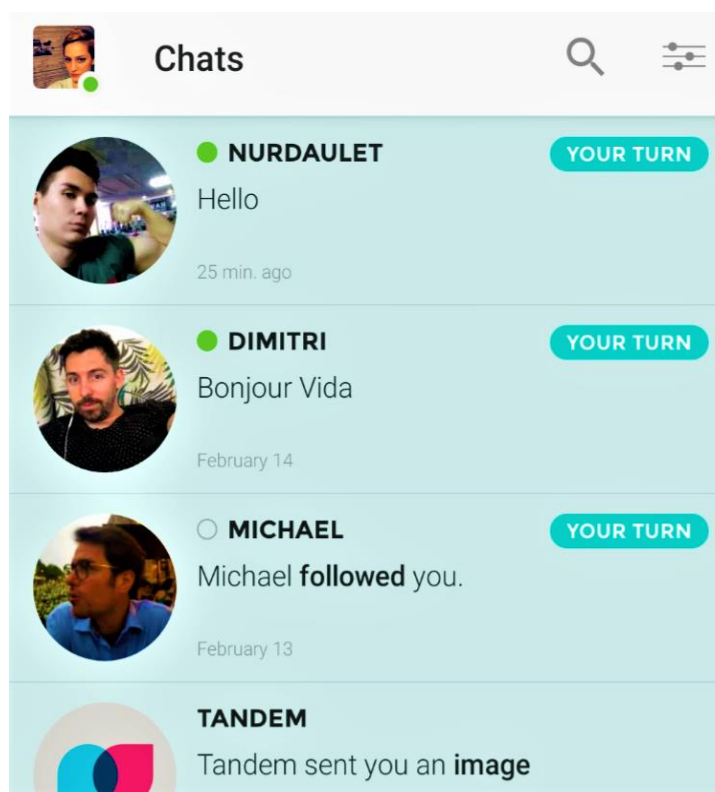

Figure 2. A Screenshot of Tandem Chats

How to Use Tandem Application

The first step would be optimizing users' language exchange profile:

1- In **Setting** users can decide on who will be able to find them.

2- The users can select something interesting to talk about in **My Topics**. Tandem offers some inspiring topics. Also a variety of topics can be chosen by the users themselves. the selected topics can be seen by those who visit the profiles.

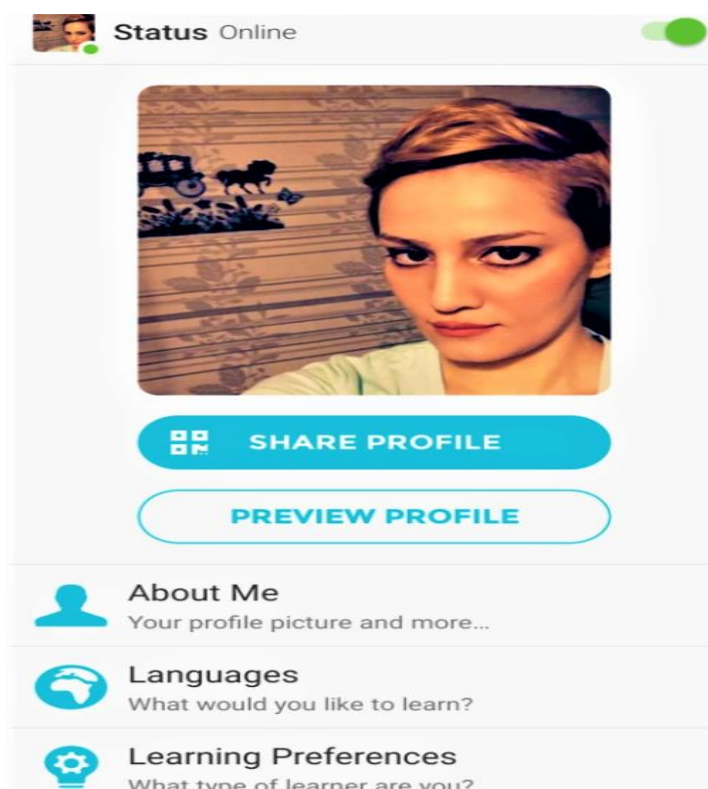3- To change the provided information and profile picture users should go to **About Me**.

Figure 3. A Screenshot of User Profile

There are three important sections on Tandem application:

    The Community: to search for new people

    The Tutors: to find and book lessons

    The Chats: to view all the users' conversations

The Community

Tandem aims to connect and match language learners so that they can practice the languages they want with the help of native speakers who are themselves the learners of other languages; therefore, they can both help and be helped. To find a language exchange partner, users should go to the "Community" section. In that section, Tandem suggests the users match with other language learners based on the language they want to master. In addition, there is a search bar to help the users find a partner with whom they have a lot in common. The search is automatically limited to those people who have joined the community with similar interests. The users can select a person to converse with after reading their profile information.

As people can write reviews and leave comments on others' profile, reading these comments can help each profile visitor decide on whether they want to communicate with the profile owner or not. Users can send text, audio, and video messages. It should be mentioned that users cannot send audio or video messages to anyone before exchanging some text messages with them. Tandem social-networking function allows the users to follow people and check out those who are following them. There is also a "Block" option to reject those who have not joined the community for the purpose of language learning.

The Tutors

As the language exchange partners cannot be considered as professional teachers, Tandem allows the users to connect with several teachers expert in many languages. Tandem tutors can explain complex concepts and difficult grammatical rules, and they can assist learners in improving their pronunciation. The application also provides qualified language teachers with the opportunity to give their own lessons on Tandem. First, however, there is a vetting process through which tutors have to show how qualified and experienced they are for offering their paid services. Some tutors offer a free trial and others offer reasonable prices for their lessons.
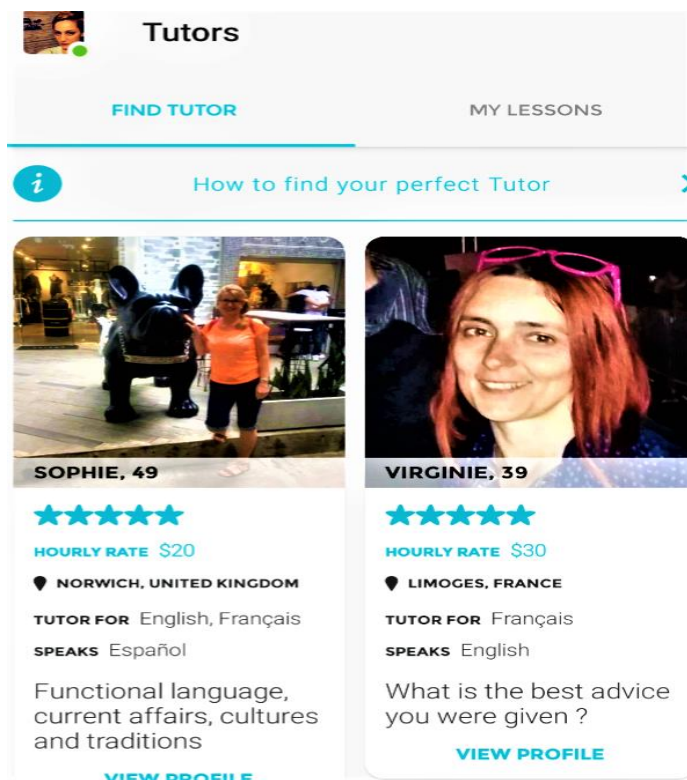

Figure 4. A Screenshot of Tutors

The Chats

In the "Chats" section the users can find the list of other people with whom they have interacted. By clicking on the name of each person the conversation appears and users can review new words and grammatical rules that they have learned through the language exchange process

Evaluation

Using technology to learn new languages is increasingly becoming popular among language learners. Among the wide variety of technological software, mobile applications have been more successful in drawing leaners' attention. Tandem as one popular application for improving speaking skill has the chance to become popular among many language learners all around the world. The application is mainly designed to help language learners enhance their learning experience by starting conversations with native and nonnative learners and being linked to other people who have similar interests and language goals.

Like other language learning applications, Tandem has its own strengths and weaknesses. The following points can be considered as the app strengths:

a) The application provides a charming language learning environment, and allows learners to leave polite and motivating comments on other learners' profiles as user reviews.

b) One of the important features of this application is the approval process that each profile must go through before a person is given any access to the learning community, and there are clear warnings during the approval process about the consequences of any misbehavior.

c) Conversation prompts can help the users to choose the people with whom they have more in common.

d) The tutor feature of the application makes the language learning community more professional. It also helps teachers to run their own businesses on their smartphones.

e) The user interface has a simple design and the app is easy to navigate.

f) The learners have the opportunity to communicate freely with the native speakers of the language they want to learn. The only costs associated with the app are for tutors; however, they are priced reasonably.

g) Video chats allow for more authentic communication.

h) People can filter out those who can see their profiles and block out those they do not want to communicate with anymore.

As for the application's shortcomings, we can point out the following:

a) Tandem does not have a built-in translator and there is no in-app dictionary.

b) The delay in the profile approval process is the main reason for the users' complaint, which can take up to seven days.

c) The app fails to connect to other applications since it lacks the integration capability. The only site that Tandem supports is Facebook.

d) It is only available on mobile phones. The limited size of many smartphones' screen might not be appropriate for the purpose of language learning.

e) There are many Tandem users who treat the chatrooms as a place for making friends rather than learning a language.

f) Not all the native speakers know how to transfer their linguistic knowledge to the users who want to master their language. In this sense, the users might find working with native tutors much more helpful than wasting time chatting with natives.

g) Learners should have a basic level of understanding of the language they want to practice, otherwise no communication would take place between them and the native speakers.

How to Use Tandem to Teach Foreign Languages

In countries where L2 is taught as a foreign language, learners may not have easy access to native speakers to improve their listening and speaking skills. Moreover, lack of authentic teaching materials and dependence on unnatural sources cannot prepare them for situations in which they need to have real communication with (non-)native speakers. There are many studies (e.g., Hughes & Lascaratou 1982)

showing that what native speakers highly care about is the comprehensibility of utterances, not necessarily the correctness of the produced grammatical structures. language teachers should, therefore, pay more attention to communicative competence of learners and provide them with lots of opportunities allowing them to gain some experience of having conversations with native speakers. This is exactly where Tandem comes in handy. Teachers can encourage learners to use Tandem out of the class time to make their experience of a new language closer to what it is really like in the real world. Tandem allows learners to have video and audio calls with native speakers of the language they want to learn, so that they can practice speaking and listening and enrich their cultural knowledge of the target language. This can help learners gain confidence and break those mental barriers they have built because of not having real contact with native speakers (see Dressman & Sadler, 2019 for more information on technology and informal language learning).

To check learners' progress and involvement in the activity, teachers can provide them with checklists asking them to provide some information on what they have just learned. This information can include new words, grammatical points, expressions, idioms, proverbs etc.

Conclusion

Tandem creates a big community of learners sharing the same goal of language learning. The platform is useful to help the learners improve their speaking skill through connection with the native speakers of the language(s) they want to master. The application appears helpful especially in those countries where the target language is being learned as a foreign language. Since many language learners prefer be taught by native speaking teachers (Todd & Pojanapunya, 2009) , Tandem provides them with the opportunity to be connected with the professional native tutors. Learners can improve their pronunciation through conversing with the native speakers. Moreover, they can learn colloquial form of the target language commonly spoken by the natives.

On Tandem, learners can talk about the topics that interest them rather than limiting themselves to the boring content provided in the commercial textbooks. It is worth mentioning that Tandem provides learners with a unique opportunity to become familiar with the cultural aspects associated with the language being learned. This software is not restricted to learners alone; it can be used by language teachers as well to improve their teaching skills. Language instructors can be creative in using this application to help their students. For instance, teachers can connect with native speakers and ask them to send voice messages or video calls to be used as authentic materials in their classes. Teachers can also learn about the latest teaching methods and techniques through connecting with professional tutors. They can even share their own experiences or apply for a teaching job on Tandem.

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Appendix

(App Review)

Application Details:

Name: Tandem Language Exchange

Publisher: Tripod Technology

Product Type: Smartphone Application Softwa

Category: Education

Operating System: Android 4.1/iOS

Hardware requirements: Smartphone/Internet Connection

Available On: App Store/ Google Play

Price: free