

Evaluation of Online Language Exchange Platforms: The Example of “Free4Talk”

İsmail Gelenⁱ

Ondokuz Mayıs University

Ercan Tozluogluⁱ

Ondokuz Mayıs University

Abstract

This study aims to evaluate online language exchange platforms and its main focus is on the website named “www.free4talk.com” as an example. The theoretical framework is based on self-directed learning, e-tandem language learning, community of inquiry and expressive language competency. Interviews with the founder, administrator and some of the users of the website are conducted and a 5-point Likert type assessment tool with 26 items and 7 dimensions is created with the help of a literature review at the same time. The findings are obtained through analysing the data collected by applying the instrument to 413 people on the website. The research reveals that this platform presents a free environment with a certain amount of safety and it contributes greatly to foreign language development of learners in terms of providing an opportunity for language practice, an undeniable improvement in expressive language competency and a social atmosphere that offers a source of motivation for language learning for both people who finished their formal foreign language training and for students who are still studying at schools.

Keywords: Receptive Language; Online Language Learning; E-Tandem Language Learning; Expressive Language; Community of Inquiry; Self-Directed Learning

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ⁱ **İsmail Gelen**, Assoc. Prof. Dr., Department of Educational Science Educational Curriculum and Instruction Subdepartment, Ondokuz Mayıs University Faculty of Education, ORCID: 0000-0001-6669-8702

Correspondence: ddrismail@hotmail.com

ⁱⁱ **Ercan Tozluoglu**, Expert, Educational Curriculum and Training Subdepartment, English Language Teacher, Ondokuz Mayıs University, ORCID: 0000-0003-3032-0446

INTRODUCTION

In today's continuously interacting societies, there is a growing tendency to learn a foreign language for the purposes of getting a decent business career, having success in academic fields or satisfy a variety of needs. The global economy with its expanding range of movement, communication focused socio-cultural atmosphere of the 21st century and the widespread reach of the Internet all have accelerated this retroactive behaviour. It is also understood that communication, which is enlisted as a prerequisite for survival in this century, should not only be built within one's own community but also with others belonging in the global society (Gelen, 2018). Thus it isn't surprising that English which is the most widely used foreign language and also can be classified as a "lingua franca" in many circumstances becomes a fundamental component of many countries' educational programs (Kalocsai, 2013; Björkman, 2013; Gimenez, El Kadri, & Simões Calvo, 2018).

However, as with all the learning efforts, there may arise some difficulties which are encountered by learners in the process of foreign language learning. For example, one of the top complaints of foreign language learners is the gap between receptive and expressive language skills that is mostly described by learners as "I can understand but I can't speak". Accordingly, it can be easily realised that the most prevalent problem of many language learners, who completed their formal education, is their inefficiency in using the language that they have been learning for a long time just because of this gap between these two competency levels. It is a well-known fact that foreign language learners, who couldn't find enough amount of opportunities to become an able producer of the language both verbal and written and have difficulties in remembering their previously learned knowledge, are faced with a struggle to get the command of the language (Heriansyah, 2012). Getting in touch with some speakers of the target language and practising the required skills together with them are thought to be one of the main solutions to this problem (Sun, Franklin, & Gao, 2017). And the contemporary way of reaching people for this kind of a practice is by online language exchange platforms. In this regard, native target language speakers are not necessarily needed. Studies are available suggesting that this much needed foreign language practice can be done with people who are at different levels of language proficiency and still trying to master the same target language (O'Dowd, 2016).

Of course, there are some issues affecting the nature and quality of communication in these environments. One of them is about whether the learners continue formal foreign language education or not. Since the people who undergoes language training at schools, language courses or different institutions with specific programs are thought to be excessively exposed to materials stimulating the development of receptive language skills (listening and reading), their expressive language skills (speaking and writing) are thought to be less developed considering the fact that they have limited in-class time for interacting with others to produce the target language (Webb, 2008; Pae & Greenberg, 2014). On the other hand, people who ended their formal language education are expected to be in a state in which they need to improve both kind of competencies. Another variable to be considered is gender. In densely populated environments like the ones we are focusing on, interactions between same and different genders are inescapable. Although gender has many implications to be taken into account in terms of different dimensions of the learning environment, women are observed to be especially keen on feeling secure from unwanted behaviours especially in online environments (Murnane, 2016). It is also perceived that learners' language proficiency levels, learning speeds and sources of motivation differ according to their education levels (Studenska, 2011). So, it can be understood that platforms which enable learners from different educational backgrounds and with diverse learning needs to get in touch with people sharing the same characteristics may become more successful. Nevertheless, it shouldn't be forgotten that language learners may want to interact with people with different language proficiency levels instead of communicating with same-level learners. While allowing all these interaction patterns, certain parameters like choosing a topic to discuss or deciding on activities to be done should also be considered carefully. The factor of age is also significant for certain behaviours and attitudes as younger and older learners have different advantages and disadvantages in terms of foreign language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2009). Furthermore, as it is

considered that peoples' ages are generally in direct proportion with their life experiences, it is assumed that people may incline to communicate with others belonging to similar age groups. The opposite may also be true for some others too. Thus, it is assumed that people in online language learning environments should be given the right to state or hide their ages.

The increase in online communication means and tools has changed the nature of foreign language learning process just like it has changed everything (Akai, 2017; Dumitrescu, 2017; Herrera Díaz & González Miy, 2017; Ho, 2018; Zhao, Chen, An, Gong, & Ma, 2019). There stand international exchange environments in which languages are being used quite naturally and as language learners and teachers, we can benefit from them in close cooperation with foreign language teaching programs used at schools. But there are many issues to be considered before diving into these environments: How much do these platforms serve to the intended language learning objective? How much benefit can learners get from them? Are they safe or not? Do they provide ease of use? Are they economically sustainable? Do they require special knowledge on how to use a specific computer program? Do they have a positive atmosphere of exchange? Do they make it possible for users to have cultural interactions?

By pondering upon all these intriguing questions and many others, the main aims of this research are to define the basic standards and to develop an assessment instrument for evaluating online foreign language exchange platforms. In this context, users of the website named "www.free4talk.com" have been chosen as the universe of this study since one of the researchers, who works as an English Language Teacher at Karabulduk Secondary School in Giresun/TURKEY, is using it with his students and thus familiar with it. Therefore, the main question to be answered in this research is: "Does the online language exchange platform called 'www.free4talk.com' provide learners with a suitable environment to contribute to their language learning process?"

Sub-problems are as follows:

1. Do "www.free4talk.com" users' opinions towards the website show a meaningful difference in terms of whether they continue formal foreign language training or not?
2. Is there a meaningful difference among "www.free4talk.com" users' opinions towards the website in terms of the gender variable?
3. Do "www.free4talk.com" users' opinions towards the website show a meaningful difference in terms of their education levels?
4. Do "www.free4talk.com" users' opinions towards the website present a meaningful difference in terms of their age groups?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Receptive and Expressive Language Competencies

In general, all the things that one can understand through a given language both verbal and written define his/her receptive language competency and all that one can produce verbally and written in a language forms his/her expressive language competency (Laufer & Paribakht, 1998). Studies investigating the nature of these types of competencies are basically focused on vocabulary knowledge in the foreign language. While Nation, I. S. P. (as cited in Thu, 2009), emphasizes that knowing a word encompasses knowing that word's verbal and written representations and the appropriate ways in which it can be used in a grammatically correct way, he also underlines that receptive and productive language competencies include all the steps needed for knowing and producing a word. Likewise, the research on foreign language learning and experiences gathered from learning and teaching processes have shown that receptive language competency which is generally much more developed continues to

improve as long as exposure to target language goes on but expressive language competency gains less speed and shows rather a stable position (Zhong, 2018; Pae & Greenberg, 2014; Webb, 2008). For this reason some learners, especially at times when they are getting ready to move on to a higher proficiency level, realize that there is a huge gap between their two competency levels and consequently, abandon themselves to despair. Richards, J. C. (2008), who defines this phenomenon as “the plateau effect” and lists its signs as a difference between receptive and expressive language skills, a speech which is not developed in complexity but fluency, a limited vocabulary, an unnatural language use and persistent language errors, highlights the importance of social learning strategies to be used actively to eliminate this effect and let the language development continue. It should also be noted that although it is not expected from someone to have the same language competency levels in a foreign language with the ones in his/her mother tongue, it is a level to be reached with time and effort (Council of Europe, 2001).

Self-Directed Learning

There are many descriptions of self-directed learning but it seems that the one including all the common characteristics of previous definitions and asserting that the learner himself/herself is responsible for all the steps of a learning process including needs analysis, activity and material choice, application and evaluation is prevailing in the field (Knowles, 1975). Similarly, Dumitrescu, V. M. (2017), who argues that using online tools takes the learner from full dependency to full independency in foreign language learning and directs him/her to self-directed learning which requires a learner to use previous knowledge as a stepping stone, states that there are some requirements, which this kind of a learning strategy inflicts upon learners, and describes them as deciding the learning goals, choosing the most effective online tools, designing a curriculum by taking the aims and instruments at hand into consideration, creating duties to be followed regularly and creating a timetable for fulfilling every duty by considering every learner’s learning pace and dedicated time. While this process which enables one to hold all the responsibility of his/her learning can be achieved through printed materials with detailed instructions, it can also be implemented with the help of some computer programs or applications which are generally based on “layered curriculum model” (Nunley, 2003). Although making use of these digital tools in language learning contributes immensely to language skills development of the learners (Haidari, Yelken, & Akay, 2019), being responsible for one’s learning doesn’t suggest that s/he can never come together with others around similar themes. In this perspective Buitrago, A. (2017), in his study on the effect of self-directed learning and cooperative learning on fluency in speaking foreign languages, finds out that using these two strategies improves foreign language skills of the students especially since the students feel comfortable because of the fact that they have the opportunity to practise with people who are making similar mistakes and gain self-confidence as they manage their own learning and evaluation processes.

E-Tandem Language Learning

Tandem language learning approach, which is once used primarily for face to face interactions and based on speaking, is moved to online environments with improvements in technology. In brief, while tandem language learning describes two individuals having different mother tongues conducting language exchanges via various means for learning each other’s first languages as a foreign language, e-tandem language learning is the representation of this strategy in the online environments and basically, it has two main dimensions as being mutual and motivating the learners for autonomy (Appel & Mullen, 2000). On one hand, it provides opportunities for feedback and correction like schooled language instruction, on the other hand, it presents opportunities for much needed exposure to foreign language and for producing the verbal and written language as much as possible (Cziko, 2004). In this regard, Cavalari, S. M. S. (2018), states that tandem language learning has increased the possibilities of language learning with the Internet era long after using face to face interactions, exchanging snail mails and e-mails, video chat, etc. Thus, with the widespread use of Web 2.0 tools which are focused on users’ exchanges based on cooperation, this strategy becomes more popular not

only with professionals but also with language learners (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016; Litzler, Huguet-Jerez, & Bakieva, 2018).. Moreover, studies focusing on activities to be done in e-tandem environments which are unjustly and frequently overlooked, have shown that learners want to practise functional language structures which they can use in their daily lives (El-Hariri, 2016), and their foreign language proficiency levels and types of activities both affect the amount of effort exerted to accomplish the tasks (Fondo Garcia & Appel, 2016). However, it is regarded as against the natural formation of communication to turn e-tandem language learning strategy's principal of mutuality to something too strict in terms of time, effort and interest so that it doesn't allow any novelties (Sánchez, 2015; Johnson, 2016).

Community of Inquiry

This concept, which has been the subject of investigation in many fields because of its contributions to learning process, has just started to become a centre of attention in research dedicated to deciphering and understanding the nature of foreign language learning. Garrison, Anderson and Archer, (2000), suggest the most widely acknowledged definition of the concept as an environment in which education focused interaction takes place around three basic elements. These are listed as cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence and all three dimensions are observed to be closely interrelated not only to one another (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010) but also to the learning styles of people joining online education programmes (Sidiropoulou & Mavroidis, 2019). Studies so far have shown that these dimensions all have significant impacts on developing various linguistic abilities (Herrera Díaz & González Miy, 2017). Although, this concept is mostly applied to situations in which the main focus is on formal instruction, it is thought to be logical to transfer its dimensions to informal teaching/learning atmospheres as similarities between the two are becoming much more apparent with the increasing use of online communication tools for both education and entertainment. However, as it is not always possible to confine online informal environments into particular foreign language competency levels, the theory of community of inquiry is thought to be appropriate to explain the nature of interactions among the learners with relatively higher language proficiency levels (González Miy & Herrera Díaz, 2015).

Review of the Website (www.free4talk.com)

“www.free4talk.com” is accessed on 06/05/2020 through Chrome Web Browser and observed to be a totally free and unconditioned language exchange platform which can be used by learners to interact with people from different linguistic backgrounds for the purpose to acquire one or more common target languages. Users can log in the website by using their e-mail addresses. It has a quite simple and easy to navigate design. Access to the website is possible via any web browser. On the home page, there are links for creating a new group, privacy policy and joining in their Facebook group and buttons for listing the already existing groups as rows of 3, 2 or just one at a time. Also, there is a button for adjusting the background light. When the page is scrolled down, exchange groups can be seen. And there is a notice of “rules and penalties” with a prison section below the groups. The punished users are enlisted in the prison section with details of user name, reason and time to be banned. From the interviews with Dao Quong Phuong, the creator of the platform, and Amr Halabi, the administrator of the website, it is understood that there is no way for a banned person to log in to the website before his/her punishment ends. Also, as we scroll down the page there appears some YouTube video links introducing the website to language learners and 18 different social media links from Facebook to Instapaper for sharing the website on other platforms. Privacy policy section explains what kind of information to be collected and needed by the website and how it will be used. According to that part the data to be gathered consists of users' e-mail addresses or phone numbers which is required for logging in the website and the group information that is created for language exchange purposes. And, the users have the right and opportunity to change their visible names. While creating the groups, first the platform is decided as Hangouts or Free4Talk and the number of people to join the group is chosen from 2 to an unlimited number of users. Then the topic, language and

language proficiency level of the group is determined. At the same time, it is possible for any user to join an already created group of his/her desire. In the group screen there are voice and video chat options, a YouTube link, a white board application and text message part. Group users' names and images are listed below the screen. Also, there is a Facebook page named "Free4Talk" which is used by the website owner for advertising the real platform. It is observed that this open-to-everyone group had 9377 members on the day of review (06.05.2020).

METHOD OF THE STUDY

This study is designed as a descriptive research which is one of the survey models. Surveys are studies that provide the opportunity to gather data from many people on a particular topic and aim to define a certain group's characteristics by collecting relevant information (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2019). In this context the research has been conducted by following the steps of (1) first reviewing the website of the language exchange platform and drawing up a general profile, (2) second making semi-structured interviews with the platform's founder and administrator, (3) third making semi-structured interviews with some of the platform users, (4) finally creating a questionnaire as an assessment tool with the implications/factors derived from the analysis of interviews and literature review and applying it to the sample user group of the website. After analyzing the data gathered with the questionnaire, research questions are answered and conclusions are drawn.

Sampling

The universe of the research consists of 9.377 people who are members of the Facebook page of the online language exchange platform named "www.free4talk.com" and are thought to be actively using the exchange website. As the study makes use of both qualitative and quantitative data, the sample is reviewed in two sections. First, the qualitative data of the study is collected from the review of the website and a group of 1 founder, 1 administrator and 4 users. The sample from which the quantitative data is collected consists of 336 users who volunteered to answer the questionnaire which is published online on Google Forms. Therefore, when selecting the sample, convenience/accidental sampling which is one of the non-random sampling types is used. In this sampling method with the aim to prevent time, money and workforce losses while reaching the sample for achieving the research goal, the study is conducted on the units of universe which are the easiest ones to reach (Balci, 2018)..

Table 1 Frequency table for the sample of study

		f	%
Age	10-20	54	16,1
	21-30	188	56,0
	31-40	56	16,7
	41-50	21	6,2
	51 and over	17	5,1
	Total	336	100,0
Gender	Female	103	30,7
	Male	233	69,3
	Total	336	100,0
Education	Primary and Secondary	8	2,4
	High School	85	25,3
	Bachelor	182	54,2
	MA	54	16,1
	PhD	7	2,1
	Total	336	100,0
Language Training	Yes	103	30,7
	No	233	69,3
	Total	336	100,0

Development of the Assessment Instrument

As mentioned in the previous section, interviews conducted with Dao Quang Phuong, the founder, and Amr Halabi, the administrator and 4 of the users by providing them with the interview questions in a written form and getting the answers from them likewise. As in this kind of interviews, the aim is to enable the flow of information between the interviewer and the interviewee (Balci, 2018) the questions are presented to the interviewees in English and in written format to give them enough time to think and answer as they like. The questions can be said to focus on the foreign language exchange platform’s purpose of founding, policy of administration, use, cost and security dimensions. Then, all the data gathered from the interviews and findings from the literature review are combined together and a question pool formed. By deciding upon the most suitable questions with the help of two other English Language Teachers, finally, an assessment instrument for evaluating the effectiveness of online language exchange platforms is designed. It should be underlined that the literature review, interviews with the users, the founder and the administrator and review of the website are all taken into account while creating and deciding on factors of this instrument.

The assessment instrument is designed as a 5-point Likert type assessment instrument and the points are graded as (1) “Strongly Disagree”, (2) “Disagree”, (3) “Neutral”, (4) “Agree” and (5) “Strongly Agree”. There is no item to be inverted. In the questionnaire the items are randomly listed so as not to let items referring to the same factor follow one another. There are 4 demographic questions on age, gender, education level and whether they continue formal language education or not. Also, there are 3 items like “If you read this question, please choose 1” for assessing the attention of the participants and get a hint on whether they actually read the items or not. Each of the items are checked as “required” on Google Forms for not letting people sign out without answering all the items and the option of “restrict with 1 answer per person” is checked. Also, two English teachers cross-checked the questionnaire, which is originally prepared by an English teacher, for correctness of the expressions and meaning and after the inspection, it is announced that the questionnaire is suitable and correct in terms of language.

Data Collection

“The Assessment Instrument for Evaluating Online Language Exchange Platforms” is published on Google Forms and the questionnaire link is shared both on “www.free4talk.com” and on the Facebook page of the group and the users are directed to the instrument with required explanations. The questionnaire stayed accessible for 10 days and was replied by 413 people. After omitting people who gave multiple answers to demographic questions and wrong answers to attention questions, there appear to be 356 users replying the questionnaire by carefully reading it. But data analysis is conducted on 336 people’s answers since 20 of the replies are omitted for being extreme value.

Table 2 The frequency table for assessment instrument’s application

Assessment Instrument’s	Item No	N	\bar{X}	ss	1		2		3		4		5		\bar{X}
					f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	
Ease of Use	7	336	4,47	,82	3	9	11	3,3	21	6,3	89	26,5	212	63,1	4,55
	9	336	4,63	,66	1	,3	3	,9	19	5,7	73	21,7	240	71,4	
Security	4	336	3,21	1,41	51	15,2	63	18,8	74	22,0	59	17,6	89	26,5	3,53
	6	336	3,61	1,14	19	5,7	38	11,3	83	24,7	111	33,0	85	25,3	
	13	336	4,07	,97	7	2,1	15	4,5	60	17,9	118	35,1	136	40,5	
	17	336	3,43	1,37	44	13,1	46	13,7	63	18,8	87	25,9	96	28,6	
	21	336	3,13	1,32	47	14,0	70	20,8	74	22,0	82	24,4	63	18,8	
26	336	3,76	1,03	8	2,4	33	9,8	83	24,7	119	35,4	93	27,7		
Charging	18	336	4,72	,54	0	0	1	,3	14	4,2	62	18,5	259	77,1	4,72

Foreign Language Learning	1	336	4,23	,82	2	,6	9	2,7	45	13,4	132	39,3	148	44,0	4,04
	2	336	4,28	,85	3	,9	11	3,3	38	11,3	118	35,1	166	49,4	
	5	336	3,67	1,15	18	5,4	37	11,0	78	23,2	106	31,5	97	28,9	
	16	336	3,98	1,11	10	3,0	32	9,5	56	16,7	93	27,7	145	43,2	
Self-Directed Learning	10	336	4,09	,99	6	1,8	21	6,3	51	15,2	114	33,9	144	42,9	4,18
	19	336	4,52	,66	0	0	2	,6	26	7,7	102	30,4	206	61,3	
	30	336	4,33	,77	1	,3	8	2,4	49	14,6	137	40,8	141	42,0	
	33	336	4,25	,86	2	,6	10	3,0	52	15,5	108	32,1	164	48,8	
	34	336	3,67	1,09	12	3,6	35	10,4	95	28,3	102	30,4	92	27,4	
E-Tandem Language Learning	8	336	4,33	,86	1	,3	13	3,9	44	13,1	92	27,4	186	55,4	4,12
	36	336	3,92	,97	5	1,5	17	5,1	91	27,1	109	32,4	114	33,9	
Community of Inquiry	11	336	3,10	1,42	66	19,6	49	14,6	84	25,0	58	17,3	79	23,5	4,02
	27	336	4,32	,71	1	,3	2	,6	38	11,3	141	42,0	154	45,8	
	28	336	4,33	,77	0	0	7	2,1	42	12,5	120	35,7	167	49,7	
	29	336	4,20	,84	3	,9	6	1,8	57	17,0	123	36,6	147	43,8	
	31	336	4,17	,81	1	,3	8	2,4	56	16,7	137	40,8	134	39,9	

It can be seen on the table that the replies to items 7 and 9 which belong to the dimension of “**ease of use**” are gathered around options of “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” ($\bar{X} = 4,55$). Answers to items 4, 6, 13, 17, 21 and 26 which are related to “**security**” dimension are observed not to concentrate on any specific direction ($\bar{X} = 3,53$). It is also understood that replies to item 18 which is the only item about “**charging**” display a negatively skewed distribution ($\bar{X} = 4,72$). Answers to items 1, 2, 5 and 16 which are about “**foreign language acquisition**” are concentrated around option of “Agree” ($\bar{X} = 4,04$). The replies to items 10, 19, 30, 33, 34 and 35 which are on the dimension of “**self-directed learning**” show a negatively skewed distribution ($\bar{X} = 4,18$). In the dimension of “**e-tandem language learning**”, items 8 and 36 are observed to be answered highly as “Agree” ($\bar{X} = 4,12$). Finally, replies to items 27, 28, 29 and 31 which are related to the dimension of “**community of inquiry**” indicate a negatively skewed distribution ($\bar{X} = 4,02$).

Reliability analysis for the assessment instrument is conducted on SPSS 22 and at first, by looking at descriptive statistics, items **14** (I feel safe while using this website to communicate with others), **15** (This website is totally free of charge), **24** (I can find opportunities to learn new things about different cultures on this website) and **25** (I see that I am becoming more fluent and self-confident as I continue using this website) which have absolute value of skewness higher than 2.0 are omitted since they violate normal distribution. Then sums of items are calculated on a separate column and Pearson Correlation Co-efficient for each single item in correlation with these sums are calculated and item **3** (I think there is a huge gap between what I can understand and what I can express in the language that I am learning) which has a correlation score below 0.20 is omitted from the assessment instrument as it is thought to be irrelevant. Independent samples T-test is run for groups of lower and higher 27% of each item’s total value and consequently, the remaining 26 items are each observed to have a significance value of lower than 0.05 so they are decided to stay in the test. Finally, the assessment instrument is detected to have a value of 0.84 in Cronbach’s Alpha scale which refers to a high reliability rate.

At last, final form of the assessment instrument appeared to have 30 items in total with 4 demographic questions and 26 5-point Likert items all focusing on foreign language learning (items 1, 2, 5 & 16), self-directed learning (items 10, 19, 30, 33, 34 & 35), e-tandem language learning (items 8 & 36), community of inquiry (items 11, 27, 28, 29 & 31), ease of use (items 7 & 9), security (items 4, 6, 13, 17, 21 & 26) and charging (item 18) dimensions. The maximum score of the instrument is 130 and the minimum is 26. Its Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient is calculated as 0.84. It should also be noted that these dimensions are derived from the theoretical framework of this study to ensure content validity of the assessment instrument and thus they are used to form the questions. In this regard, to reach related findings on the research questions, all dimensions are evaluated together.

RESULTS

To answer the 1st sub-question, Independent Samples T-test is applied on data gathered from the assessment instrument and it is found out that items 1, 16 and 19 show significant difference in terms of the variable of whether users continue formal language education or not ($p < 0.05$). When looked closely, it can be realized that item 1 (I think this website helps me understand different sounds that people produce while speaking the language that I am trying to master.) belongs to the dimension of foreign language learning and replies to this item shows significant difference in favor of users who do not continue formal language education. Actually, the reason for this, may be that learners still pursuing a formal language course don't feel any need for listening exercises. Item 16 (I think I can understand more than I can produce in my foreign language.) is listed under the dimension of foreign language learning and focused on the gap between receptive and expressive competencies. It is seen that the replies to this item shows significant difference in favor of users who continue formal language education. As a reason for this, it can be said that learners with much exposure to the target language may develop a more comprehensive receptive competency and thus the gap between the two competency levels become more visible. Item 19 (I think this website encourages me to communicate with others on various topics.) belongs to self-directed learning dimension and is about the ability of applying the planned learning activities. Answers to this item displays significant difference in favor of users who do not continue formal language education. In fact, this is the attitude which is expected from those people who need to take the responsibility of their own learning. Other items of the assessment tool do not show any significant difference in terms of variable of whether users continue formal language education or not. The results of this analysis are presented below. Cohen's *d* effect sizes are calculated just for the items which have significant differences ($p < 0.05$). As the effect size of item 1 is calculated as low ($d < 0.20$) it can be concluded that the variable of whether users continue formal language education or not has a very low rate of explaining this item. Likewise, ETA square value of item 16 is calculated as low ($d < 0.5$) which means that this item has a low rate of explaining the current difference. Finally, ETA square value of item 19 is observed to be low and it has a low level of explanation rate on the independent variable.

Table 3 Statistics results on user views in terms of the variable of whether users continue formal language education or not.

Item No	Continuing Formal Education	N	\bar{X}	SS	df	t	p	Cohen's d Effect Size
1	Yes	103	4,0777	,91490	334	,020	,020	0,17
	No	233	4,3047	,77506				
16	Yes	103	4,1748	,98446	334	,039	,039	0,25
	No	233	3,9013	1,16473				
19	Yes	103	4,3981	,67649	334	,021	,021	0,27
	No	233	4,5794	,65252				

To answer 2nd question Independent Samples T-test is conducted and items 4, 10, 11, 13, 28 and 35 are observed to show significant differences ($p < 0.05$). Item 4 (I haven't encountered any molesting/flirting attempt on this website.) belongs to the dimension of security and it is understood that the replies to this item demonstrate significant difference in favour of male users. It is assumed that males are optimistic about this issue because they come across with these incidents less frequently than females. Item 10 (I don't hesitate talking with people on this website as I see that others are making similar mistakes with me.) is listed under the dimension of self-directed learning and focused on motivation. The answers to this item show significant difference in favour of males. Item 11 (I have friends on this website with whom we occasionally communicate with each other.) belongs to community of inquiry dimension and concentrates on social presence. The replies to this item display significant difference in favour of female users. So, it can be assumed that females are more fond of intimate and continuous partnerships for language learning. Item 13 (I feel safe while communicating with people on this website.) is about security dimension and the answers to this item are observed to

show significant difference in favor of female users. Thus, it is understood that the notion of security can be interpreted differently by men and women. Item 35 (I feel motivated as I know that I am not judged because of my mistakes on this website.) refers to self-directed learning dimension and focuses on the element of motivation. The answers to this item display significant difference in favour of females. And thus, it can be said that women feel safer in environments that they are not subjected to negative criticism. Statistics table of this analysis is presented below. Cohen's d effect size is calculated only for items showing significant difference and as each of the effect sizes are low ($p < 0.05$), it is concluded that the variable of gender has a low rate of explanation on these items ($d < 0.20$).

Table 4 Statistics results on user views in terms of the variable of gender.

Item No	Gender	N	\bar{X}	SS	df	t	p	Cohen's d Effect Size
4	Female	103	2,9515	1,44425	334	-2,285	,023	0,26
	Male	233	3,3305	1,38270				
10	Female	103	3,9029	1,06195	334	-2,416	,016	0,28
	Male	233	4,1845	,94928				
11	Female	103	3,4175	1,34692	334	2,698	,007	0,32
	Male	233	2,9657	1,44396				
13	Female	103	3,8835	1,01267	334	-2,408	,017	0,28
	Male	233	4,1588	,94487				
28	Female	103	4,4563	,71093	334	1,994	,047	0,24
	Male	233	4,2747	,79443				
35	Female	103	4,4175	,76086	334	2,913	,004	0,35
	Male	233	4,1373	,83461				

For the 3rd sub-question, One Way Anova is conducted on the data and when looked at the homogeneity of variances, it is seen that variances of items 8, 13 and 18 procure the disequilibrium of $p < 0,05$ and can be further examined. Item 8 (I think this website provides me with the opportunity to teach my culture and language to others.) is about e-tandem language learning dimension, item 13 (I feel safe while communicating with others on this website.) belongs to security dimension and item 18 (Being totally free of charge makes this website more accessible and encouraging than others.) is about charging dimension. By examining the post-hoc tables of these items, the following results are drawn. It is understood that there is a significant difference between primary/secondary school graduates and high school graduates, bachelors and PhD holders regarding item 8 and the eta square effect size calculated as 0,039 which is observed to be low ($\eta < 0,05$). In terms of item 13, there appears to be a significant difference between high school graduates and bachelors and MA holders. The eta square effect size is 0.028 which is a low value. In terms of item 18, there is a significant difference between primary school graduates and high school graduates, bachelors and MA holders and the eta square effect size is 0.046 which is also a low value. So, none of the items has an effect size to be considered high enough to show reason for changes. Following post-hoc tables of these items are presented below.

Table 5 Post-hoc table in regards to education levels for item 8.

Item 8	Primary/Secondary	Highschool	Bachelor	MA	PhD
Primary/Secondary	-	P= ,038	P= ,038	P=,270	P=,020
Highschool	P= ,038	-	P= 1,000	P=,442	P=,656
Bachelor	P= ,038	P= 1,000	-	P=,411	P=,597
MA	P= ,270	P= ,442	P= ,411	-	P=,240
PhD	P= ,020	P= ,656	P= ,597	P=,240	-

Table 6 Post-hoc table in regards to education levels for item 13.

Item 13	Primary/Secondary	Highschool	Bachelor	MA	PhD
Primary/Secondary	-	P= ,874	P= 1,000	P=,997	P=,999
Highschool	P= ,874	-	P= ,072	P=,042	P=,985
Bachelor	P= 1,000	P= ,072	-	P=,881	P=,997
MA	P= ,997	P= ,042	P= ,881	-	P=,956
PhD	P= ,999	P= ,985	P= ,997	P=,956	-

Table 7 Post-hoc table in regards to education levels for item 18.

Item 18	Primary/Secondary	Highschool	Bachelor	MA	PhD
Primary/Secondary	-	P= ,004	P= ,038	P= ,001	P=,248
Highschool	P= ,004	-	P= ,947	P= ,980	P=,970
Bachelor	P= ,001	P= ,947	-	P=1,000	P=,898
MA	P= ,002	P= ,980	P= 1,000	-	P=,909
PhD	P= ,248	P= ,970	P= ,898	P=,909	-

To answer the 4th sub-question One Way Anova is conducted and looking at the homogeneity of variances, item 36 is observed to procure the disequilibrium needed $p < 0,05$ and is selected for post-hoc tables. This item (I think my opinions are taken into consideration while decisions about the community are made.) belongs to e-tandem language learning dimension. There appears to be a significant difference between 51 and over aged users and users of 10-20, 21-30 ages.

Table 8 Post-hoc table for item 36 in regards to age variable

Item 36	10-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51 and over
10-20	-	P= 1,000	P= ,765	P= ,966	P= ,015
21-30	P= 1,000	-	P= ,639	P= ,962	P= ,006
31-40	P= ,765	P= ,639	-	P= ,999	P= ,128
41-50	P= ,966	P= ,962	P= ,999	-	P= ,191
51 and over	P= ,015	P= ,006	P= ,128	P= ,191	-

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

As it is a well-known fact that one of the prime requirements of our century is acquiring a common/foreign language to communicate with the global society and have the advantage of clusters of information (Gelen, 2018). However, while learning a new tongue people are frequently observed to find it difficult to express themselves in this foreign language (Richards, 2008) since they are generally deprived of necessary opportunities to put the language in use. Mainly for this reason, learning a new language is considered as a tough and complicated job by the students in Turkey too (Yurtsever Bodur & Arıkan, 2017). But, today with the rise of the communication tools via the Internet, language learners are readily interacting with each other in online platforms to practise and develop especially expressive competencies (Xu S. , 2019). And these learning environments, like any others, are thought to need a theoretical structure and some standards to provide its users with the most benefits. In this study, one of the such online communities named “Free4Talk” is evaluated in regards to dimensions of “ease of use, security, charging, self-directed learning, e-tandem language learning, community of inquiry and receptive and expressive competencies in foreign language learning” which are derived from the interviews and the literature review to ensure a high content validity of the assessment instrument.

In this context, it can be observed from the *Table 2* that this language exchange platform is considered as user friendly and easy to navigate by most of the participants ($\bar{X} = 4,55$). The direct access to chat rooms and the need for very little information to sign in the website are assumed to be

the main reasons for this conclusion matching the findings of related studies (Garett, Chiu, Zhang, & Young, 2016). On the other hand, when it comes to the feeling of security, there appears to be some doubts ($\bar{X} = 3,53$). Having a look at the items on this dimension, it can be seen that, especially, the replies to *Item 4* which questions whether users encountered molesting attempts or not have a significant difference in favor of males on not encountering any behavior of this kind which can be interpreted as females are facing with this issue more frequently. But contrary to the previous item in this category, *Item 13* presents a significant difference in favor of female users. Thus, it can be inferred that the notion of safety regarding the use of these environments has different perspectives in terms of gender (Murnane, 2016). When it comes to charging, there seems to be a consensus on this platform's being free ($\bar{X} = 4,72$). Moreover, directing learners to gain control of their language learning process can be regarded as a successful aspect of this environment ($\bar{X} = 4,18$). But it must be underlined that as the replies to *Item 19* exert, there is a significant difference in favor of learners who do not continue formal education in terms of motivation towards communicating with others. This finding is thought to demonstrate that the need for activating the linguistic knowledge and producing the language is key to progress (Garrison D. , 1997; Pae & Greenberg, 2014). It can be accepted as supporting the idea of this group of learners' being in need of practicing the language more than learners who are still pursuing their formal education. In terms of developing receptive and expressive skills in a foreign language, this website can be described as having a positive impression on users ($\bar{X} = 4,04$). As previously mentioned, there frequently emerges a huge gap between the receptive and expressive language competency levels while learning a foreign language (Richards, 2008). The replies to *Item 16* in this category, especially, supports this view and there appears a significant difference in favor of learners continuing their formal education which can also be considered as meaningful in showing that formal language training environments generally lack the required amount of activities to support an even development between receptive and expressive language competencies. Also, having the integrity to become a learning community that has a specific direction can be seen as a commonly accepted feature of this environment ($\bar{X} = 4,02$). Especially, *Item 28* which implies the social presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) in the form of friendship relations is observed to have a significant difference in favor of female users. Thus, it can be guessed that female users are keener on the feeling of belonging and intimacy. And, lastly, it can be assumed that cultural exchange can be seen as a commonly acknowledged feature of this website ($\bar{X} = 4,12$). Accordingly, many studies discussing the issue in terms of e-tandem language learning, exert that the social atmosphere created in these environments speeds up the natural process of language acquisition (Botero, Questier, & Zhu, 2019; Cavalari, 2018; El-Hariri, 2016; Kawai, 2006)..

Finally, by considering all these findings, it can be concluded that this website addresses a wide audience regardless of age, language, gender, educational level and whether the users continue their language education or not. Also, it provides an encouraging social learning environment, opportunities for cultural exchange and language practice in a relatively secure and free learning environment.

SUGGESTIONS

1. As the research focuses on developing a general outline for the standards of online language exchange platforms, it lacks comprehensive findings on the correlation between informal language societies and the development of expressive language competency. Thus, further research can be conducted on this topic.
2. Safety dimension can also be further investigated in terms of gender and age variables which has implications in the study.
3. A quality list can be created by evaluating these platforms for offering them as alternative environments for language practice.

4. A study focusing on the effects of simultaneous use of formal language training and informal language exchange platforms in foreign language learning/teaching can also be investigated.

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