

# It's Tandem, not Tinder! Interrogating Authenticity and Trustworthiness of Language Exchange Applications in Adult Learners: A Central Asian and Middle Eastern Perspective

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## Abstract

Language exchange is based on teaching (the native language) and learning (the foreign language) in tandem. There are numerous language exchange applications (LEAs) on smartphones that connect language exchange partners from all over the world. This study investigates the trustworthiness of these applications and whether they are genuinely used for exchanging the target language or used as a camouflage for finding friends and building relationships. The study was conducted using a case-study approach focusing on two identical language exchange applications. Research tools included questionnaires and observation. The participants were active LEA users and included male and female language learners. The empirical data collected from LEAs and the qualitative data analysis will first look into application authenticity, user honesty and the most common misuse of the LEAs. It then attempts to gauge users' attitude towards LEAs. Finally, it puts forward some recommendations for implementing LEAs amongst application developers, educators and adult learners.

**Keywords:** app/application, e-learning, language exchange, Speaky(App), in tandem (learning), Tandem (app), Tinder (app)

## 1. Introduction

The landscape of language learning has witnessed a remarkable evolution with the proliferation of smartphone applications, a burgeoning field that continually surprises with innovative features, rendering learning more affordable, portable, and effective than ever before. The widespread availability of network access and the affordability of app installation on personal smartphones have democratized language learning, making it accessible to almost every individual. The tech-savvy nature of most language learners opens avenues to diverse learning platforms, supplementing traditional tools like electronic dictionaries, translators, and outdated wordlists installed in their handsets.

The extensive familiarity with various smartphone applications has transformed language acquisition, providing learners with a spectrum of choices. Some applications have demonstrated notable effectiveness in language development, earning four stars and above in user ratings. In contrast, others have been perceived as less effective, garnering poor reviews for shortcomings in pedagogical methodologies, technical functionalities, and overall quality.

This paradigm shift in language learning, facilitated by smartphone applications, underscores the need for a nuanced evaluation of the diverse tools available. As learners navigate this expansive landscape, the quality and efficacy of these applications become paramount considerations, shaping the future trajectory of language acquisition through innovative and accessible technological mediums.

### 1.1 Problem Statement: Navigating Social Bonds and Educational Integrity

Amidst the burgeoning landscape of LEAs on smartphones and on the web, this study specifically scrutinizes the potential misuse of platforms such as Tandem (2021), which, despite their educational design, may inadvertently adopt features akin to dating applications like Tinder (2021). In contrast to existing research endeavors, our primary focus delves into social dynamics, emphasizing the development of relationships and bonding within the non-pedagogical context of language exchange.

While prior studies predominantly support the potential enhancement of academic programs and global university relationships through these social developments (Ryan, 2014), our study adopts a distinctive stance. Here, the emergence of relationships at the expense of language acquisition within a language exchange environment emerges as a noteworthy concern. This apprehension resonates with earnest language learners who actively avoid interactions with users potentially seeking motives beyond genuine language learning.

Unlike the taboo and forbidden nature of utilizing dating applications in certain religions and cultures, LEAs tread a delicate line, offering avenues for connections beyond linguistic pursuits. It is this clandestine subversiveness that instigates feelings of uncertainty and despondency among learners genuinely committed to the pursuit of authentic language learning. Beyond the cultural and religious debates surrounding interactions with opposite-sex learners, the study recognizes the escalating use of smartphone applications in language

learning and underscores the increasing significance of LEAs in revitalizing language education with real human connections.

In this exploration, we navigate the intricate balance between the evolving social dynamics within LEAs and the steadfast commitment to genuine language learning. This dual role underscores the need for a nuanced examination of how these platforms can simultaneously facilitate social interaction and preserve the educational integrity of language exchange. The study aims to contribute a fresh perspective to the discourse on language exchange applications, illuminating the challenges and opportunities at the intersection of language learning, social bonding, and educational ethics.

1.2 The Importance of the Problem

In the quest to safeguard learners, children, and ourselves in the realm of online and application tandem learning, this study aspires to contribute significantly to the discourse. As educators, exercising utmost diligence becomes imperative when considering the integration of LEAs into our educational settings. A judicious approach, involving thorough research and first-hand experience with the applications, is paramount to ensure that learners are not inadvertently exposed to culturally inappropriate learning platforms.

1.3 Research Questions:

This investigation seeks to address three pivotal questions, striving to illuminate critical aspects of Language Exchange Applications:

1. To what extent do LEAs align with the teaching and learning expectations of language exchange partners?
2. How effectively do LEAs contribute to the development and enhancement of target language skills?
3. Can the authenticity and trustworthiness of LEAs be assured throughout their application use?

Anticipated answers to these inquiries will unfold in the subsequent sections, specifically within the 'Results and Discussion' section. Meanwhile, this study provides succinct background information on the two applications employed for distinct purposes: Tandem and Tinder. In the concluding section of the Introduction, the learning context and the driving motivations behind the researcher's undertaking of this study will be expounded upon, enriching the foundation for the comprehensive exploration that follows.

1.4 What are Tandem and Tinder?

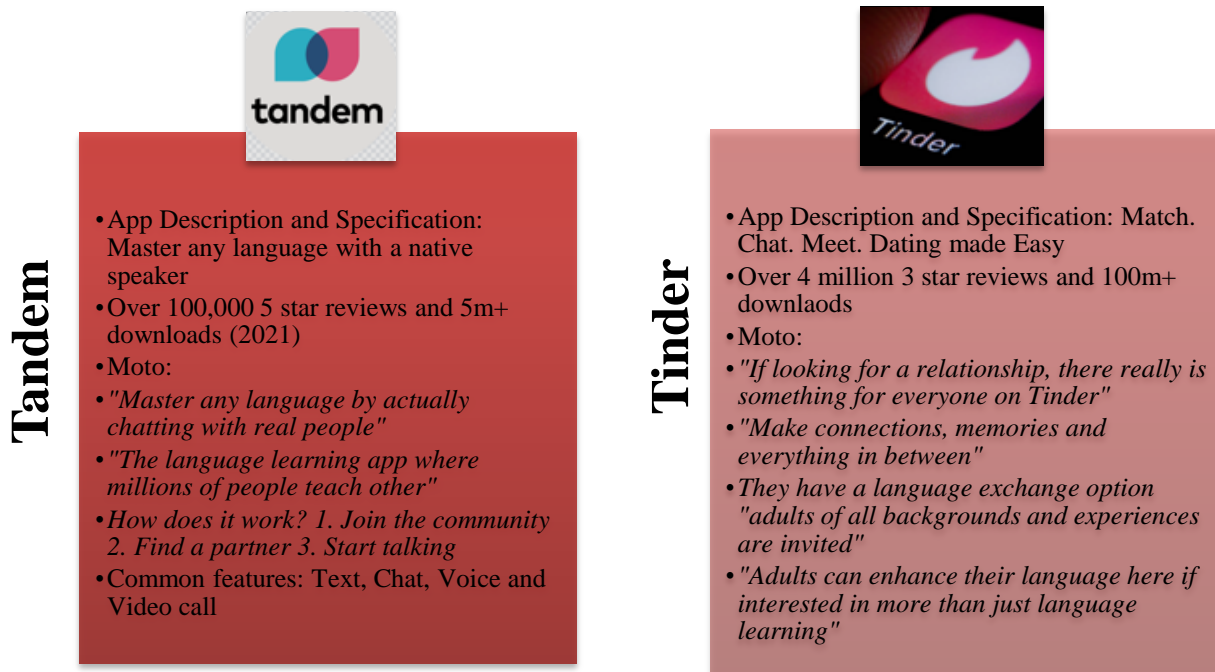


Figure 1. Different uses of Tandem and Tinder applications

To strengthen data validity, the inclusion of an additional language exchange application, Speaky (2021), has been deemed imperative. As the second most widely utilized language exchange platform, Speaky shares analogous features with Tandem. This strategic incorporation serves as a critical component for the meticulous observation of user activities, enabling an in-depth exploration of the efficacy, trustworthiness, and appropriate or inappropriate utilization of both applications.

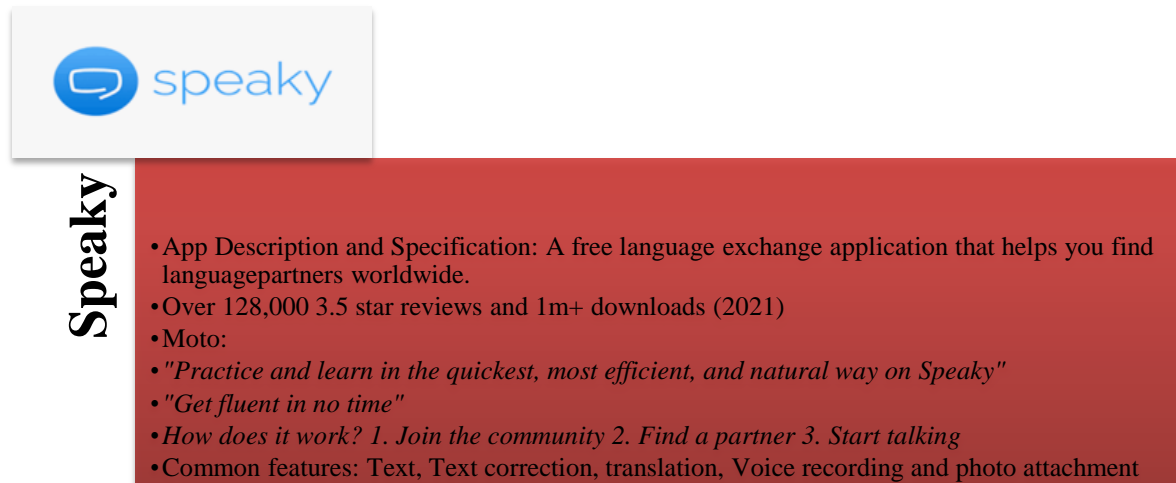


Figure 2. Speaky, an additional language exchange application

### 1.5 The Learning Context

The current landscape of English language learning is significantly influenced by the globalization of the language. A substantial portion of users within LEAs is comprised of non-native English speakers who actively seek opportunities to practice with native English speakers. This demographic predominantly resides in non-English-speaking countries, facing limited chances for real-world English language immersion with native speakers. Given the constraints on accessing authentic English-speaking environments, LEAs emerge as a primary avenue for language acquisition. Within this framework, the collaborative dynamics involve pairs of language exchange partners, each contributing by teaching their native language and concurrently learning the target language from their partner. Notably, new users often engage with various partners initially, refining their preferences until they establish connections with partners characterized by commitment and diligence.

The individualized nature of the learning experience is a defining feature. Preferences vary, with some users demonstrating a preference for learning alongside partners of the same gender, while others seek a dynamic by connecting with partners of the opposite gender. This nuanced aspect, particularly the dynamics influenced by gender preferences, will be explored comprehensively in the subsequent discussion.

### 1.6 What Motivated the Researcher to Conduct the Study?

As a Tandem learner, my pursuit of acquiring a foreign language, beneficial both professionally and for comprehending the learning challenges faced by my adult students, has led me to encounter a myriad of user profile bios and introductory statements within the application. Amidst the diversity, I found myself questioning the alignment of certain profiles with the platform's intended purpose. Nonetheless, I also engaged with dedicated exchange partners who shared my commitment to genuine language learning.

In navigating this language exchange application as a seasoned learner, I opted to overlook less sincere users, actively seeking earnest language learners. However, this discerning approach led me to a contemplative realization. I pondered on the potential impact of such disingenuous profiles on my teenage language learners. What if they were to encounter individuals using the platform not for language learning but as a dating application? The disconcerting prospect of perverted intentions undermining the motivation of sincere language learners emerged as a pressing concern.

This introspective experience prompts a vital question: How can we ensure the safety and efficacy of language learning platforms for our students? The need for further research in this realm is imperative. By delving into the nuances of user intentions within language exchange applications, we can strive to create a secure, engaging, and genuinely educational environment for our learners. This imperative underscores the significance of ongoing inquiry to refine and optimize language learning platforms for the benefit of all participants.

### 1.7 Literature Review

The historical evolution of Tandem learning, as explored by Krotz (2002), initially emerged in 1963 with the intent of fostering connections between French and German youth post-World War II. Rooted in the 'Principles of Reciprocity and Autonomy' articulated by Brammerts (1996) in the 1990s, tandem learning thrived on the collaborative interdependence and mutual support of partners. The commitment to equal investment in time, energy, and dedication to preparation became pivotal for successful tandem learning.

However, the landscape of tandem learning underwent a substantial transformation in the subsequent years due to technological advancements, globalization, and widespread internet access. The shift from traditional face-to-face tandem (Calvert, 1992) to diverse online formats such as internet tandem, email tandem, chat-based e-Tandem, online tandem, teletandem, and video chat tandem, illustrates the dynamic evolution of this pedagogical approach (Little & Brammerts, 1996; Appel & Muller, 2000; Ushioda, 2000; Toyoda & Harrison,

2002; O'Rourke, 2005; Telles & Vassallo, 2006; Elia, 2006).

The present study introduces a contemporary facet referred to as 'app-tandem,' leveraging technologically enhanced features on smartphones for seamless, portable, and easily accessible language exchange.

Altay (2017) underscores the impact of affective factors on learning, emphasizing the role of emotions, attitudes, motivations, and values in tandem learning. This aligns with the broader consensus that effective language learning is not solely content-based but deeply influenced by the learner's emotional engagement, resulting in reduced anxiety and enhanced self-stimulation and emotional monitoring (Garay & Etxebarria, 2012).

Tandem learning is celebrated for its less formal, friendly, and interactive nature, fostering cross-cultural connections and internationalizing participants through second language acquisition. Despite the plethora of advantages, the study expresses concern about a potential shift in learners' focus from language learning to socializing. The issue of partner switching is examined, with Ryan (2014) and Larson (2019) acknowledging its positive aspects, such as creating low-anxiety environments and promoting learner engagement. However, the present study reveals instances where partner switching is driven by unmet expectations, a shift in intentions from learning to relationship-building, and the failure of reciprocity between partners.

While Ryan (2014) emphasizes the positive social aspects of tandem learning, it is crucial to note that not every culture and community welcomes familial bonds with strangers. Larsen (2019) highlights the scarcity of research on tandem learners' beliefs, suggesting a gap in understanding the disparities between beliefs, expectations, and the realities of tandem learning. The call for further research underscores the need to delve deeper into tandem learner beliefs to bridge this gap.

In essence, the multifaceted nature of tandem learning, enriched by technological advancements, cultural nuances, and affective dimensions, necessitates a comprehensive exploration of its dynamics. This study not only contributes to the evolving landscape of language exchange but also prompts a critical examination of the challenges and opportunities inherent in tandem learning, urging further investigation into learner beliefs and experiences.

**2. Methodology**

This study adopts a case study approach, aiming to comprehensively analyze the contextual dynamics and processes inherent in the phenomenon under investigation (Meyer, 2001). Data collection involves a triangulation strategy combining questionnaires, observations, and user profile biographies within the language exchange applications (LEA) Tandem (2021) and Speaky (2021).

**2.1 Participants**

The participants, language exchange partners aged 18-55, were recruited online over a three-month period. Communication occurred exclusively through the selected LEAs, ensuring a virtual interaction environment. Twenty users were initially approached based on a diverse mix of profile bios, with the final selection of eight participants who willingly shared their learning experiences. Notably, participants confirmed the use of pseudonyms for confidentiality.

Unlike traditional approaches where participants are pre-selected and given strict instructions, this study engaged participants after they had already commenced their language learning journey. This unconventional method allowed for a more authentic understanding of attitudes and experiences, deviating from imposing predetermined responses.

Participants exhibited a proactive approach to language learning, installing LEAs primarily for educational purposes. The absence of predetermined instructions regarding interaction, planning, or scheduling of learning sessions allowed participants to organically continue their established arrangements.

Table 1. General demographics and profile bios

Participants' General Demographics (Screenshots of Tandem and Speaky Biographies can be found in Appendix 1)			
1. Name: Maya Age: 33 Gender: Female Native language: Pashto Target language: English Tandem exchange partner gender: Could not find any.	2. Name: Seneena Age: 55 Gender: Female Native language: Russian Target language: Arabic Tandem exchange partner gender: Male	3. Name: Oz Age: 29 Gender: Male Native language: Urdu Target language: Korean Tandem exchange partner gender: Female	4. Name: Maria Age: 38 Gender: Female Native language: English Target language: Arabic Tandem exchange partner gender: Male
5. Name: Umar Age: 29 Gender: Male Native language: English Target language: Arabic Tandem exchange partner gender: Female	6. Name: Zoe Age: 18 Gender: Female Native language: English Target language: Turkish Tandem exchange partner gender: Male	7. Name: Ayman Age: 40 Gender: Male Native language: Arabic Target language: English Tandem exchange partner gender: Female	8. Name: Tanbi Age: 28 Gender: Male Native language: Arabic Target language: English Tandem exchange partner gender: Female

## 2.2 Instruments

To enhance the robustness of online data collection in this qualitative inquiry, a triangulation approach was deliberately employed. The convergence of multiple data sources aimed to fortify the study's validity. Triangulation involved synthesizing information from three distinct channels:

### a) Initial Observation of Records (Appendix 1):

The first data source comprised an in-depth scrutiny of existing records, specifically the biography statements of eight tandem learners within their respective tandem application profiles. Additionally, their articulated expectations regarding tandem learning were meticulously examined. This process facilitated an insightful understanding of participants' backgrounds and initial motivations.

### b) Investigation of Key Facts from Profile Biographies and Messages (Appendix 3):

The second facet involved a comprehensive investigation into key facts derived from the observation of profile biographies and messages exchanged between the researcher and other language exchange partners. This method aimed to corroborate and augment insights gathered from the initial observation, providing a more comprehensive perspective on participant interactions within the language exchange community.

### c) Feedback from Tandem Learners (Appendix 2):

The third dimension centred on feedback gathered directly from the eight tandem learners who were integral to the study. These participants were specifically instructed to focus on four critical aspects throughout their tandem learning journey:

1. Overall Attitude towards Tandem Learning
2. Pleasant and Positive Experiences Contributing to Successful Learning
3. Unpleasant Experiences Impeding Learning Efforts
4. Primary Focus When Joining the Tandem Community (Language Learning, Friendship, Both, or No Specific Focus).

By soliciting feedback in these targeted areas, the study aimed to capture nuanced experiences and perceptions of tandem learning from the participants' standpoint. This triangulation of qualitative data sources offered a comprehensive and multifaceted exploration of the phenomenon under investigation.

This methodological approach not only fortified the reliability of the findings but also facilitated a richer understanding of the complex dynamics at play within the language exchange applications. The subsequent analysis and interpretation drew upon this triangulated data to derive meaningful insights into the multifaceted realm of tandem language learning. The appendices provide a detailed account of the tools and procedures employed in this triangulated data collection process.

## 2.3 Analysing the Methodology

Following data collection, key statements from participants were systematically reviewed and categorized based on the four predefined aspects. Despite the small-scale nature of the study, the participants provided rich insights, offering a detailed description of LEAs and their effectiveness in language learning. Participant feedback was meticulously categorized for relevance to research questions and identified themes.

Participants' voices are authentically represented through direct quotations (in italics) to illuminate the identified themes. The demographic data, while representing a limited sample size, contributes to a deeper understanding of the experiences within LEAs. The analysis provides a nuanced exploration of the efficacy of language exchange applications, offering valuable perspectives for the study's research questions. A summary of participant questions and relevant answers can be found in Appendix 2.

## 3. Research Findings: An In-depth Analysis

In pursuit of evaluating the efficacy and trustworthiness of LEAs, this study ventured beyond the surface to uncover nuanced insights. While participants remained uninformed about the study's overarching goal to prevent biased responses, the ensuing analysis presents a profound exploration into the realms of language exchange expectations, advantages, and disadvantages within the LEA landscape.

### 1. Language Exchange Expectation: A Paradigm Shift

Contrary to prevailing studies emphasizing the quality of collaboration, this investigation spotlighted a predominant focus on receiving language input rather than engaging in reciprocal learning. User bios echoed statements such as: "I am interested in learning (language)", "I want to learn, can someone help me improve my (language)", "Message me if you can teach me", "I want to practice my (language) speaking and conversation" underscoring an orientation towards receiving rather than giving language assistance. The paradigm shift towards individualistic language goals raises questions about the genuine language exchange ethos within these platforms. Very few state "I am here to teach you/offer you my native language", "Message me if you would like to learn (language)" (See Appendix 3, number 6 and 8). These statements clearly indicate that when joining the tandem community, most of the users expect to receive target language input instead of collaborating, learning in tandem and offering their native language to their tandem partners. Moreover, the study discerned that the individualistic nature of Tandem, often an independent choice, may deter language teachers from recommending these platforms due to the perceived emphasis on building interpersonal friendships rather than language acquisition.

## 2. Advantages: Empowering Autonomous Learners

In supplementing various modes of autonomous language acquisition, tandem learning emerges as a potentially effective method when both language partners willingly align their language learning techniques, communication strategies (both written and oral), and adhere to etiquettes geared towards fostering successful language acquisition. The discernible advantages associated with tandem learning, which align with the findings of prior research, are elucidated below. These advantages are substantiated by insights gleaned from participant responses (See Appendix 2).

This approach not only diversifies the range of language acquisition strategies but also underscores the significance of mutual consent and alignment between language partners. The subsequent sections delve into a nuanced exploration of these advantages, drawing on both theoretical underpinnings and participant experiences, thereby elevating the discussion from a mere enumeration of results to a comprehensive examination of the implications and intricacies associated with tandem language learning.

- **Autonomy and collaboration:** LEAs play a pivotal role in fostering learner autonomy, prompting individuals to assume responsibility for their own learning journey. As underscored by Wardak (2021), this empowerment extends to the conscientious creation of personal notes, the strategic formulation of revision techniques, and the implementation of individualized learning approaches. The cultivation of autonomy within this context signifies a departure from traditional pedagogical structures, emphasizing the learner's active engagement in shaping their learning experience. *"My language partner always explained the difference between two similar words, their subtle difference in meaning, spelling and pronunciation"*, *"My partner sent videos and other resources"*.
- **Availability of Native Speakers:** The dynamic nature of LEAs is evidenced in learners' proactive utilization of their native-speaking partners' competencies, native accent and accurate pronunciation when faced with uncertainties. This collaborative exchange not only highlights the symbiotic relationship between tandem learners but also underscores the potential for cross-cultural knowledge transfer within the language learning context. *"I have not only improved my Arabic, but I have also learnt the importance of having faith and trusting God when in a difficult situation"*.
- **Empathy:** In the context of informal and communicative learning, participants demonstrate a notable ability to comprehend and address each other's learning challenges. These challenges, which may encompass inhibitions and deficiencies in teaching skills, hold significant implications for the planning and execution of effective informal learning strategies. This reciprocal understanding among learners forms a crucial component in the intricate landscape of informal and communicative learning methodologies. Exploring the nuances of this mutual recognition unveils insights into the intricate dynamics of collaborative learning processes, shedding light on the ways in which participants navigate and support one another's educational journeys. This examination contributes to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in informal and communicative learning paradigms, fostering a richer discourse within the broader context of educational research. *"My language partner was not a teacher, but I wasn't too, so we just talked and chatted instead of teaching each other"*.

## 3. Disadvantages: A Comprehensive Examinations

While tandem learning through LEAs is celebrated for its informal, friendly, and interactive environment, particularly with the convenience of smartphone applications, our study unveils a spectrum of challenges that extend beyond pedagogical concerns commonly associated with language learning. In particular, the present research sheds light on a critical issue that has received limited attention in previous studies: the tendency for users to prioritize finding a personal connection over language exchange.

Historically, research has predominantly championed tandem learning, focusing on issues such as incomplete language coverage (Cziko, 2004), unconsented language learning strategies, and organizational lapses in learning sessions (Little & Brammerts, 1996). However, our study introduces a nuanced perspective, emphasizing the underexplored challenge of a diminished emphasis on language exchange, with users veering toward relationship-building.

Our findings resonate with common disadvantages reported by LEA users participating in our study and observed by the researcher. These issues, potentially leading to a decline in user motivation, are expounded below, illustrated by pseudonymous statements in Table 1 (See Appendix 2):

- **Lack of collaboration and prioritising personal learning objectives:** Some users experienced challenges when their partners prioritized personal learning goals over reciprocal language exchange, resulting in disgruntlement and potential disengagement. *"My partner was more interested in learning, than teaching"*. Umar's partner demanded proof-reading from him, which has not been part of the arrangement for the language exchange.
- **Inconsistent facilitating, aiding and lack of commitment:** Free access to LEAs, lacking official terms of agreement, can foster indolence among language partners, leading to irregular language input and difficulty in finding committed partners. Zoe's language partner has developed a rather indolent attitude and does not provide her with language input on regular basis, while Zoe continues to send her partner the daily language dose. *"Partners reply late. Hard to find a committed partner"*.
- **Home environments:** Synchronous learning impediments, arising from time differences and busy life/work schedules, hindered interaction and learning arrangements. *"Not being able to interact more due to different times in home countries and work commitments"*.

- **Lack of equilibrium between the language offered and desired / Plurilingual (Ryan, 2014):** The scarcity of tandem partners within a specific application necessitates users to install multiple LEAs, particularly challenging for learners seeking partners with specific language goals. Maya has not been able to find a language exchange partner. She had to install other applications and search for a partner. *“Didn’t work for me, no one wants to learn my language”*.
- **Honesty of language partners:** Instances of partners misrepresenting language proficiency and teaching incorrect information, highlighting potential integrity issues within the tandem learning community. Maya was taught by a non-native English-speaking partner, who pretended to be a native speaker and had taught an incorrect pronunciation of the word “Entrepreneur”. *“Most users contacted me for my profile photo to chat, and teach me incorrect English”*.
- **Lack of mutual interest between partners:** Divergent interests between partners may result in a lack of topics that align with both partners' needs and interests, potentially diminishing the quality of language exchange. Tanbi is interested in learning about sports, games and healthy lifestyle, whereas his partner wants to learn words related to politics. *“My partner wants to learn about politics, but I’m interested in sports and lifestyle”*.
- **Divergent interests and goals:** Varied learning experiences and needs, especially when learners are at different proficiency levels, can complicate the learning process. Tanbi is a beginner in Arabic, whereas his language partner is a proficient user of the English language. *“Not positive, we were different levels and partner just wanted to learn, very serious”*.
- **Uncertainty about language acquisition and lack of curriculum knowledge:** Challenges arise when one partner lacks understanding of teaching and learning foreign language strategies, impacting the effectiveness of corrective feedback and study methods. Seneena’s partner is unfamiliar with planning the teaching in accordance with her level. *“My partner sometimes sends words that are too easy for me and I already know them, and other times sends words that are above my level”*, *“He is a chef and enjoys speaking and chats, but I want him to teach me the rules and write the differences between words, as I do for him, so I can save the messages and get back to them later”*
- **The challenge of finding the right partner:** Difficulties in finding a compatible language exchange partner, exacerbated by users seeking different types of relationships, ranging from casual chatting to more personal connections. *“I joined for learning, but it was very difficult to find a serious partner. Most of them were interested in casual chatting and getting to know me on a personal level. And when I refused flirting, I was unpaired and blocked”*. Maria has reported losing her male language partners, because their friendships and personal feelings were not welcomed and reciprocated. In other words some of her language partners did not have clear learning goals and were more interested in text-message pleasantries.
- **Unexpected incidents:** Instances of users forming personal connections and becoming emotionally attached to language partners, diverting attention from learning objectives. *“I found a good friend instead of language partner, but she blocked me later, because she didn’t like me”*.

The multifaceted challenges identified in the preceding sections highlight a paramount concern, particularly poignant for a female Central/South Asian researcher and educator in the Middle East—the noticeable shift from language learning to the cultivation of friendships within the virtual learning environment. This phenomenon raises disconcerting feelings, as friendships often take precedence over the pursuit of the target language. While this concern is acknowledged in the present study, it is worth noting that Appel and Mullen (2000) posit that developing a 'key-pal' attitude and fostering friendships alongside language learning can be acceptable, provided that language learning remains the primary focus and reciprocity is upheld. Beyond the participants' voiced challenges and advantages associated with LEAs, an in-depth analysis of user profiles and behaviors provides additional layers to our understanding. These observations serve to contextualize and enrich the broader discourse on the utilization of LEAs:

(See Appendix 3):

- **Profile Adjustments during Ramadan:** During the holy month of Ramadan, users exhibit a cultural sensitivity by removing profile photos and setting statuses to offline. This practice may align with the cultural norm discouraging interactions between non-related individuals of opposite genders during this sacred period.
- **Serious Language Learners:** A prevailing trend among LEA users is a sincere commitment to language learning, indicating a collective dedication to educational pursuits.
- **Dual Intent of Language Exchange and Friendship:** The majority of users express a dual purpose for joining LEAs, seeking both language exchange opportunities and the potential for building friendships.
- **Diverse Intentions for Joining:** A substantial portion of users predominantly joins the platform with the primary goal of finding friends and potential matches, underscoring varied motivations within the community.
- **Preference for Native Speakers:** Some learners exhibit a preference for language exchange exclusively with native speakers, signalling a desire for linguistic authenticity and proficiency.
- **Ambiguous Expectations Regarding Language Exchange:** A notable observation is the prevalence of users seeking language instruction without explicitly stating their willingness to reciprocate by offering their language in exchange.

- Expectations of Reciprocity: A common expectation among users is the desire for language exchange and reciprocity, emphasizing the importance of a mutually beneficial learning experience.
- Unilateral Language Offer: A minority of learners express a willingness to offer their language without expecting a reciprocal exchange, reflecting a more altruistic approach to language learning.
- Preference for Same-Sex Language Partners: Some users, predominantly female learners, express a comfort level with same-sex language partners, reflecting a preference driven by cultural or personal considerations.
- Diverse Motivations Beyond Language Learning: A significant proportion of learners join the community with intentions extending beyond language learning, reflecting the varied and dynamic nature of user motivations.
- Illustrative Example of Disconcerted User: Singular cases, such as the prime example of a disconcerted learner/user, underscore the importance of investigating and understanding individual experiences within the LEA context.

This comprehensive analysis extends beyond enumeration of points, offering a nuanced exploration of the observed dynamics. It provides a foundation for understanding the intricacies of user behavior within LEAs and sets the stage for a deeper discussion on the evolving role of virtual platforms in language acquisition and social interactions.

#### **4. Discussion of Research Questions: Unravelling the Complexities of Authenticity and Trustworthiness in Language Exchange Applications**

The exploration in the present study sought to unpack the intricacies surrounding authenticity and trustworthiness, providing a comprehensive examination from the unique perspectives of adult learners in Central Asian and Middle Eastern contexts. Against the backdrop of a technological era where language acquisition intersects with virtual interactions, the findings in this chapter shed light on the outcomes of our investigation into the authentic language exchange experience. Through a meticulous analysis of data collected from the participants, this section unravels the layers of trustworthiness, shedding light on the implications for language education in a rapidly evolving digital landscape and responds to the research questions thoroughly.

##### *4.1 RQ1: The Expectations*

The cornerstone of successful tandem language learning, as established by prior research, rests on the principles of reciprocity and mutual support. In an effort to further emphasize the importance of integrity, honesty, and decency in LEAs, this study introduces an additional 13 'Re-s.' These encompass aspects beyond mere reciprocity:

- ✓ Respect (your language partner)
- ✓ Represent (a conscientious and a true language learner)
- ✓ Refrain (from using inappropriate language or materials)
- ✓ Remain (committed and honest to the language learning goals)
- ✓ Respond/reply (to your language partner's messages and questions in a timely manner)
- ✓ Require (clarification when unsure and be ready to reciprocate)
- ✓ Revise (the language and take responsibility for your learning)
- ✓ Resign/retire (when language partner becomes a disruptive and harassing)
- ✓ Resource (your language partner with materials, links and language resources)
- ✓ Restrict (personal information including photos and videos, focusing on language learning rather than self-promotion)
- ✓ Retain (attachment to the target language, not the language facilitator)
- ✓ Revere (the teaching skills of your language partner, not the personal and physical qualities)
- ✓ Resist (personal feelings)

These 'Re-s' serve as a comprehensive guide for LEA users, aiming to foster a conducive and respectful learning environment while maintaining the primacy of language learning goals.

##### *4.2 RQ2: The Reality*

A pivotal concern arises when personal feelings and bonding emerge within the language exchange context. While human fascination with others is inherent, a critical distinction must be drawn between the primary goal of learning and subsequent friendships, mirroring traditional face-to-face classroom dynamics. Similarly, the same distinction should apply to LEA environments. Users should not register on these applications with the intent to find personal matches or engage in non-educational discussions. The study underscores the importance of preserving the educational integrity of LEAs and discourages users from transforming language exchange into platforms resembling dating applications. The emphasis remains on learning, with users encouraged to explore dating applications designed explicitly for relationship-building. If one's focus is on building relationships more than on learning, they may use the dating applications that come with "language exchange" option (Tinder, 2021).



Contrary to the anticipated low anxiety and stress-free learning environment suggested by previous studies, participant feedback reveals instances of heightened anxiety and discomfort (Oz's partner). Privacy concerns, exemplified by a participant's experience of having personal information Googled by a language partner, underscore potential risks associated with non-educational interactions. Instances of users seeking personal contact details, video calls, and compatibility on personal levels challenge the intended educational focus of these platforms. While some participants successfully navigate these challenges, maintaining a unique relationship within respectful boundaries, others encounter unwarranted requests and experience discomfort.

One of Maria's partners insisted on obtaining a photo from her before proceeding to subsequent sessions. When refused, he severed the contact and un-paired with Maria, while remaining an active user (presumably seeking new partners). The occurrence of such incidents is also confirmed by another user, who is certainly not in favour of implementing LEAs for language exchange (See Appendix 3 number 11). On the other hand, Ayman and his female language partner who teaches him English, and Maria and her new male partner who teaches her Arabic, both pairs enjoy casual chat pleasantries, exchange banter and polite jokes, but refrain from using inappropriate and obscene language/contents and have reported an interesting and fun learning experience. Likewise, both pairs established a rather unique and special relationship with each other from the very beginning by calling each other 'brother and sister' in order to palliate the prohibition of chatting with an opposite-sex language partner.

#### 4.3 RQ3: *The Authenticity and Trustworthiness and Their Impact on Serious Learners/Users*

While human facilitators are acknowledged for promoting vocabulary learning (Wardak, 2021), some LEA users contend otherwise. The transient nature of partnerships, coupled with the absence of commitments, allows users to terminate tandem learning abruptly, prompting a continuous search for new partners. The involvement of human facilitators, therefore, hinges on the degree of acquaintance between language exchange partners, emphasizing the challenge of finding equilibrium. The study posits that successful tandem learning necessitates agreement on non-pedagogical aspects, focusing on linguistic abilities rather than personal factors.

The study acknowledges the potential development of personal feelings between conscientious language partners, emphasizing the maturity required to navigate such situations. This mirrors face-to-face learning environments, but the study underscores the importance of maintaining the initial intention of joining LEAs—to learn a language, not to build relationships.

### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study deliberately avoids presumptive commentary on LEAs as self-gratifying or flirtatious platforms. Instead, it recognizes the potential paramount importance of LEAs in the realm of distance learning, particularly in the context of the increasing prominence of e-learning, amplified by the global health crisis, COVID-19. The prudent use of LEAs for informal, communicative, and versatile learning is emphasized. While acknowledging the inevitable limitations within educational settings, the study refrains from asserting ineffectiveness but rather illuminates the challenges and dynamics inherent in LEAs.

Tandem learning, a popular aspect within LEAs, reveals certain trends, including a tendency for more interaction between opposite genders, posing challenges in finding same-gender language partners. Similarly, age matching and pairing for less-desired first languages present hurdles. Requests among language partners are often rooted in preferred first/native language, nationality, gender, and age, as gleaned from user biographies. Notably, in this study, all eight participants paired with opposite genders due to difficulties in securing same-gender partners. In essence, no single LEA emerges as a panacea for language development. However, the ensuing recommendations aim to mitigate obstacles faced by developers, educators, and language learners:

App developers:

- Consider restricting and blocking certain phrases that may be obtrusive or offensive.
- Monitor and limit the exchange of personal contact numbers.
- Provide an introductory guide on the basic principles of LEAs, including do's and don'ts.
- Introduce an option for group learning, potentially minimizing one-to-one contact.

Educational practitioners:

- Encourage a holistic understanding of language learning motivation, considering factors like gender, age, and language level when pairing learners.
- Obtain parental consent for students under 18 and ensure application reliability.
- Explore the use of common socializing applications with pedagogically motivating features.

Language learners/users:

- Clearly state preferences against deviant and perverted interactions.
- Adhere to cultural norms regarding bonding with strangers.
- Acknowledge that the effectiveness of learning platforms depends on the relationship between language exchange partners.

In the realm of smartphone-assisted language learning, there exists no singular learning strategy or application that serves as an unequivocal solution. The path to successful language acquisition on mobile devices is not universal, and the quest for trustworthy

language exchange partners poses a challenge for many users. Intriguingly, for a subset of learners, the key to triumphant language acquisition appears to be concealed within the dynamics of the relationships forged between language exchange partners—a secret that eludes a straightforward revelation.

## 6. Research Challenges Limitation of the Study

The primary limitation of this study lies in the population sample, where despite captivating profile bios, users' reluctance to participate may indicate motives beyond language learning. This challenges the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, potential bias towards reporting LEA disadvantages by all eight participants may have obscured significant advantages. In addition, the interview questions' focus on major concerns and the limited number of questions aimed at encouraging participation might have influenced the depth of responses. However, this streamlined approach allowed for unique and valuable insights into the authenticity and trustworthiness of LEAs. The study recognizes these limitations as avenues for future research and refinement of investigative methodologies.

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NA

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NA

## Competing interests

The authors unequivocally affirm the absence of any discernible competing financial interests or personal relationships that might have given rise to potential influences on the integrity of the work presented in this paper. This declaration reflects the authors' commitment to transparency and underscores their dedication to upholding the highest standards of scholarly integrity in the pursuit of academic excellence.

## Informed consent

Obtained.

## Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

## Provenance and peer review

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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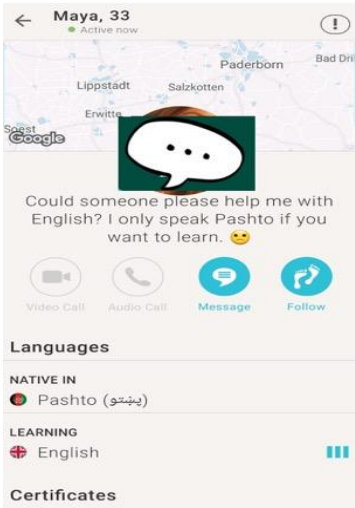
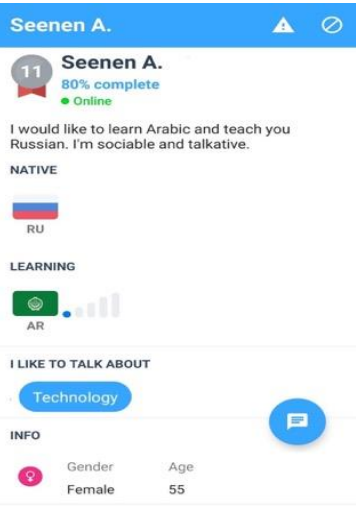

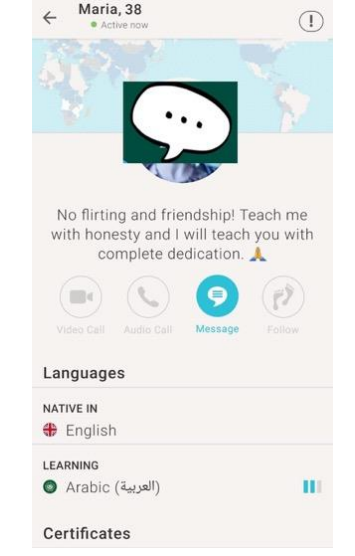
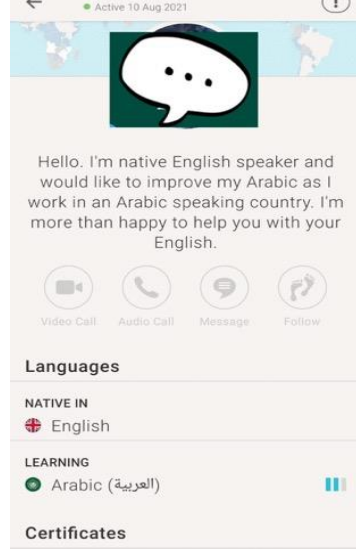
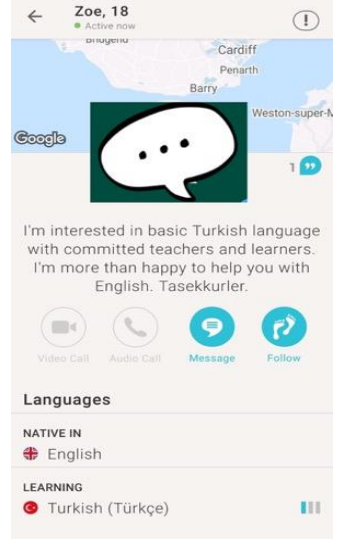


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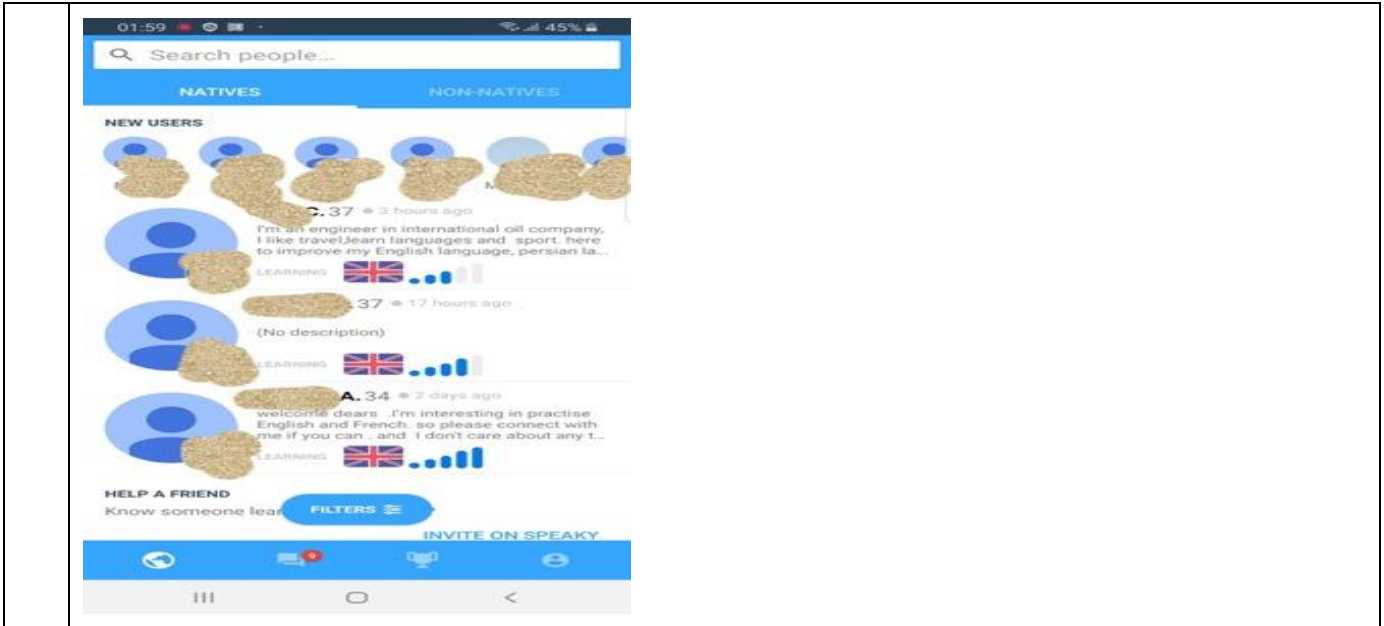
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**Appendix 1: Participants' General Demographics (Continues)**  
**Tandem and Speaky Bio (Screenshots of user profile)**

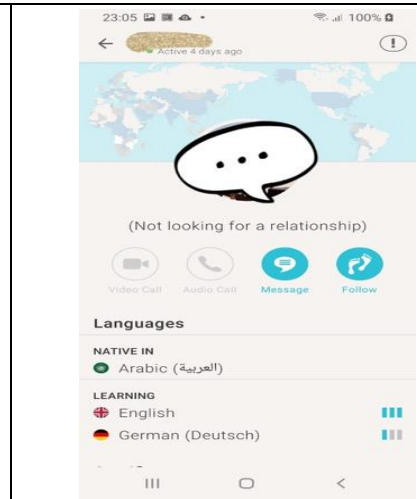
<p><b>1. Maya</b></p> 	<p><b>2. Seneena</b></p> 	<p><b>3. Oz</b></p> 
<p><b>4. Maria</b></p> 	<p><b>5. Umar</b></p> 	<p><b>6. Zoe</b></p> 
<p><b>7. Ayman</b></p> 	<p><b>8. Tanbi</b></p> 	

<b>Appendix 2: Participants' Responses to Interview Questions</b>				
<b>Participants</b>	<b>Could you name some pleasant and positive experiences during the language exchange?</b>	<b>What unpleasant experiences/challenges did you encounter?</b>	<b>How would you comment on the overall efficacy of the application?</b>	<b>Would you be willing to comment on whether you joined Tandem for language learning or friendship?</b>
<b>Maya</b>	<i>Good to know different people, and app is free.</i>	<i>Most users contacted me for my profile photo to chat, and teach me incorrect English.</i>	<i>Didn't work for me, no one wants to learn my language.</i>	<i>Both</i>
<b>Seneena</b>	<i>A very welcoming place and everyone very friendly. They were happy to help with my language and not ask me to teach them back.</i>	<i>My partner sometimes sends words that are too easy for me and I already know them, and other times sends words that are above my level", "He is a chef and enjoys speaking and chats, but I want him to teach me the rules and write the differences between words, as I do for him, so I can save the messages and get back to them later"</i>	<i>Not very good. Couldn't find a partner near my age or education level. Most of them were younger and never been in teaching.</i>	<i>I joined for learning a language, but nobody wanted to learn my language. So they ask me for being friend and I accepted, even better as I don't have to teach, only learn from them.</i>
<b>Oz</b>	<i>I enjoyed the chat and my partner was friendly and chatty in the start. But later she left me.</i>	<i>I found a good friend instead of language partner, but she blocked me later, because she didn't like me.</i>	<i>I just got bored with my new partner and left learning.</i>	<i>Friendship. Learned only some words. I will find a new partner and learn new words.</i>
<b>Maria</b>	<i>My language partner always explained the difference between two similar words, their subtle difference in meaning, spelling and pronunciation.</i>	<i>Before finding my last partner, most of the others were interested in casual chatting and getting to know me on a personal level. And when I refused flirting, I was unpaired and blocked.</i>	<i>I have not only improved my Arabic, but I have also learnt the importance of having faith and trusting God when in a difficult situation.</i>	<i>I joined for learning, but it was very difficult to find a serious partner.</i>
<b>Omar</b>	<i>My partner sent videos and other resources.</i>	<i>My partner was more interested in learning, than teaching.</i>	<i>I think I taught more and learned less, but it's fine.</i>	<i>Both.</i>
<b>Zoe</b>	<i>My language exchange partner sent me numerous helpful videos and resources for learning Turkish.</i>	<i>Partners reply late. Hard to find a committed partner.</i>	<i>Overall tandem learning has been really helpful for me, particularly for daily phrases/words in the target language.</i>	<i>My main focus was on learning the language, but I was seeking a friendly and relatable partner too, so both factors were important to me.</i>
<b>Ayman</b>	<i>Luckily, I found a serious partner who also wanted to improve her language and we were both focused on language learning, nothing else.</i>	<i>Not being able to interact more due to different times in home countries and work commitments.</i>	<i>Yes, but my partner is a language teacher. Her highlighting and revision skills helped.</i>	<i>Initially, not interested in friendship and chatting at all. Only joined to improve my English. Later, began to like my language partner, but like a sister and a good friend, nothing else.</i>
<b>Tanbi</b>	<i>My language partner was not a teacher, but I wasn't too, so we just talked and chatted instead of teaching each other.</i>	<i>My partner wants to learn about politics, but I'm interested in sports and lifestyle.</i>	<i>Not positive, we were different levels and partner just wanted to learn, very serious.</i>	<i>Friendship.</i>

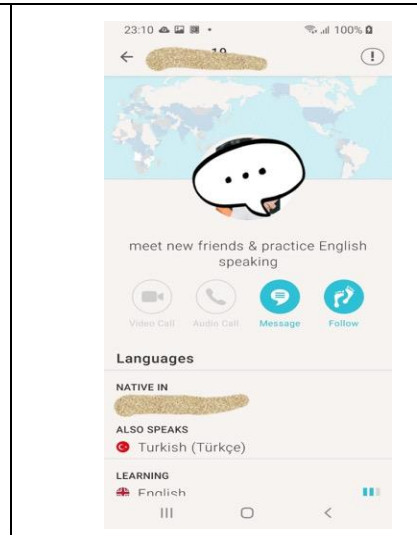
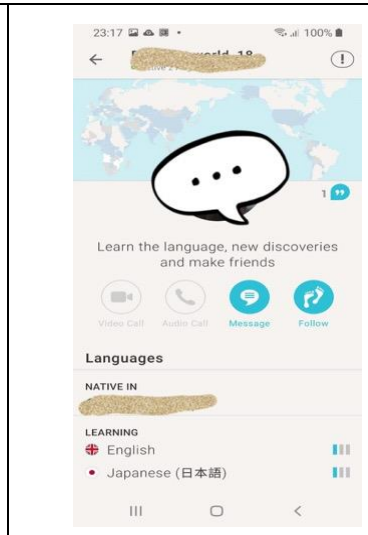
<b>Appendix 3: Researcher Observations of User Activity (First example)</b>	
<b>#1</b>	It's the holy month of Ramadan. Profile photos are removed and statuses are made offline. This may corroborate the fact that interaction between non-related opposite genders should not be practiced in general and especially during a holy month (see screenshot). Is it such a decadent activity that should not practised during this particular time of the year? This to some extent confirms the nature and attributes of the LEAs and its tantamount to a taboo against interaction of non-related, opposite-sex LEA users in some cultures.



#2 Examples of serious Language learners/users (Most):



#3 Examples of learners aiming for language exchange and friendship (The majority):





**# 4 Examples of users who have joined for findings friends and building relationships mainly (A large majority):**

The first screenshot shows a profile with a bio "A friend who is not my wife" and "NATIVE EN". The second screenshot shows a profile with a bio "I am bored and will talk to anyone so don't be shy" and "NATIVE IN EN, LEARNING EN, French (Français)". The third screenshot shows a profile with a bio "make new friends" and "NATIVE IN EN, LEARNING English, Italian (Italiano), Turkish (Türkçe)".

**#5 Examples of learners searching for Native speakers (Some):**

The first screenshot shows a profile with a bio "I want to practice English more with a native" and "NATIVE IN EN". The second screenshot shows a profile with a bio "I am an English teacher I would like to improve my skills with native English speakers." and "NATIVE AR, LEARNING EN". The third screenshot shows a profile with a bio "I'm professional Arabic teacher, looking to practice languages with native speakers only: thanks" and "NATIVE AR, LEARNING EN".

**#6 Examples of learners who demand language instruction without stating if they offer their language in exchange (Most):**

The first screenshot shows a profile with a bio "I want to learn English I want to speak english" and "NATIVE EN". The second screenshot shows a profile with a bio "Can you help me to study for I" and "NATIVE IN EN, LEARNING EN". The third screenshot shows a profile with a bio "If you can teach me english, message me" and "NATIVE IN EN, ALSO SPEAKS EN, LEARNING English".

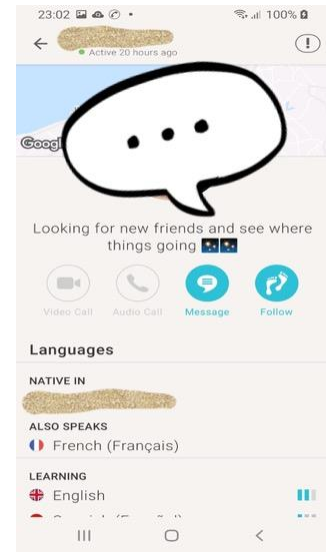
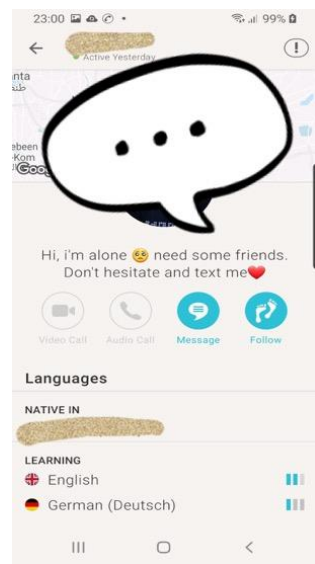
**# 7 Examples of learners who expect language exchange and reciprocity (Most):**

**# 8 Examples of learners who are willing to offer their language without expecting a language in exchange (A few):**

**#9 Examples of learners who feel comfortable with same-sex partners (Some):**



**#10 Examples of learners who definitely have not joined the community for language learning (Most):**



**#11 One prime example of a disconcerted learner/user:**

