



A Language Exchange Tool for Internationalization: Tandem Experience at METU

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Abstract

This paper covers the story of face-to-face Tandem language learning partnership program in a Turkish state university, Middle East Technical University (METU). All the information about the program is based on first-hand experiences of METU-Tandem coordinators and feedback from participants. The paper informs audiences about the participant numbers and demographics of the program, which gives some insight into problems encountered. Tandem language exchange is not a remedy for all obstacles in the process of internationalization but a wise tool to help METU “to develop awareness of internationalization and multi-cultural life experiences of all the university components” and “to organize activities that will increase our students’ awareness of multicultural life” (METU Strategic Plan, 2018-2022). METU-Tandem, offered across the campus since 2015, has been contributing to the internationalization efforts of METU, bringing together “Erasmus and International Students” and “Home Students”. The program is not new to European countries, especially Italy, Spain, England, France and Germany. However, METU-Tandem is the only regular and widespread application of Tandem language exchange in a campus environment in Turkey.

Keywords: *internationalisation, language exchange;*

1. Introduction

We live in an age when internationalization efforts of universities have gained momentum. This is due to the increasing global competition and interaction, availability of funds from outside and changes in global infrastructure of transportation and information (Şahin, 2017). Accordingly, METU also aims for more international cooperation and has set itself the goal of “developing awareness of internationalization and multi-cultural life experiences of all the university components (Metu Strategic Plan, 2018-2022). To this end, Objective 15.1 of the Strategic Plan reads “Organizing activities that will increase our students’ awareness of multicultural life”; and one of these activities is the METU-Tandem Language Learning Partnership.

1.1. Tandem Language Exchange

Tandem is practiced in numerous countries and predominantly at the international universities based in Germany, Spain, Italy, France, England, China and the US. As Tan, Wigglesworth and Storch (2010) state this language learning method “has been applied in language teaching in different ways. It can be integrated into a language course or be carried out independently as an after-school activity for different time lengths and frequencies” (as cited in Sung & Poole, 2017, p. 99). Also, there are language schools operating based on Tandem language exchange in Europe. In Finland, “tandem has, during the last decade, been established as a methodology for adults within adult education, where the most familiar example is FinTandem” (Karjalainen, Pörn, Rusk and Björkskog, 2013, p.166).

This is a partnership between two people, each of whom is learning the other’s language at roughly the same level of proficiency in their respective target languages. Learners of two different but native speakers of languages get together on a regular basis and help each other to practice their target languages. During the meetings, each learner assumes the role of the “expert” (= native) and “novice” (= non-native) in turns. This structure provides learners with an opportunity to develop a friendly and comfortable relationship where the native speaker does not function as a teacher but as an empathizing peer who gives assistance and assurance to the other peer (Brammerts, 1996). In short, in Tandem language learning, learners work in pairs in order (1) to learn more about one another’s character and culture; (2) to help one another improve their language skills, and (3) to exchange additional knowledge - for example, about their professional life (Calvert, 1999, p.56). “First used in face- to-face contexts, Tandem is now increasingly being used by language-learning partners located in different countries who are linked via various forms of electronic communication, a context that has become known as e-Tandem” (Cziko, 2004, p.25). Overall, Tandem is economical, flexible and open



to a wide range of applications, and its main types are: (1) Face-to-face and (2) Electronic. One characteristic of Tandem language exchange is *reciprocity*, which means both learners should contribute as equally as possible to the learning process. In other words, “both partners should use the language in equal amounts to insure that they profit equally from the exchange” (Schwienhorst, 2003, p. 431). The other characteristic of Tandem language exchange is *autonomy*, which holds that “learners alone determine what they want to learn and when”.

2. Tandem language exchange at METU and challenges in practicing it

METU Tandem Language Learning Partnership Program is a free and extra-curricular activity, and an initiative taken by two language instructors to bring Erasmus, international and home students into contact. The program is face-to-face Tandem language exchange and has been practiced at a large scale, regularly in Turkey only at METU since 2015. The program has been offered across the campus to students with levels of foreign language competence ranging from low to high levels. So far, 186 students have participated and received certificates of participation upon successful completion of the program. Because the Department offers courses in English, German, Spanish, Italian, French, Greek, Arabic, Russian, Chinese and Japanese, METU-Tandem includes all these languages but is not limited with them as long as matches can be made. The general practice while matching partners is based on applicants’ preference for the target language and their level. However, due to the low ratio of international students volunteering to participate in the Tandem language exchange compared to home students, during the pairing of Tandem learners it is made sure that one of the partners in each Tandem pair is a native speaker of Turkish. In Tandem programs the control and formality of instruction varies according to the aims. METU-Tandem, in this respect, is a semi-informal form of Tandem, where learners are required to attend two evaluation meetings to be certified upon completion of the program.

2.1. Limited number of international students and pre-dominance of non-European languages

“As of 2016, 1,744 international students (excluding international exchange students) are enrolled in programs at METU” (Metu Strategic Plan 2018-2022, p.30). Considering the total size of students (18,058 undergraduates) across the campus, this number leads to a ratio imbalance between home and foreign student numbers, making it difficult to assign a partner to all Tandem applicants in all languages. This limitation may be caused by “the adverse effect of security concern in the world and in the region on international mobility towards our country” (METU Strategic Plan 2018-2022, p.109). Apart from security issues in the country and region, political tensions between Turkey and some European countries undermine the number of incoming European students. Karakaş (2017) reported that the political tensions between Germany and Turkey last year had an influence on the student exchange program, Erasmus as well. Some German students going to Turkey with Erasmus even changed their minds at the last minute and remained in Germany. As seen in Figure 1, the majority of international students visiting Turkey are not from Europe. However, a majority of the applicants to METU Tandem among home students are the ones who want to practice European languages, mainly English, German, French, Italian and Spanish. Figure 2 shows Erasmus partners who sent more than 10 students between 2015 and 2018 and only two of these countries are European, whose languages though are not studied much by home students.

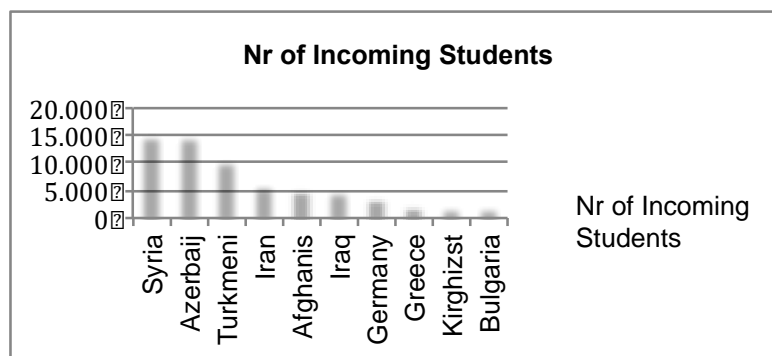


Figure 1: Top 10 countries sending students to Turkey in the academic year of 2016- 2017. (Council of Higher Education, 2016- 2017 higher education statistics, 2017).

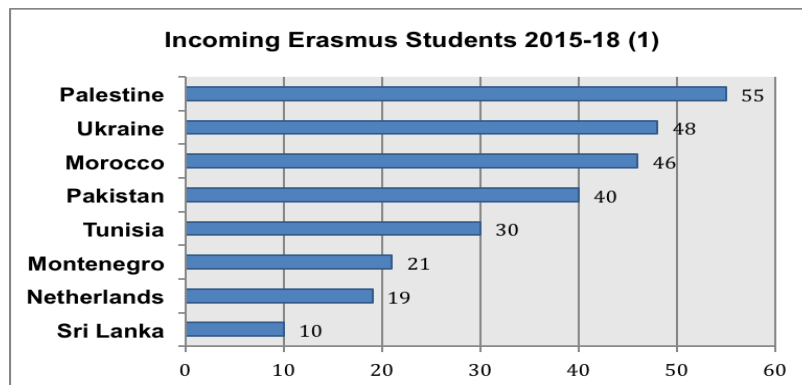


Figure 2. Erasmus partners who sent >10 students between 2015 and 2018
(Source:ICO-METU, 2018)

2.2. Exchange students with unfavourably low-level Turkish

Although Kana et al. (2016) suggested that there was a marked increase in the number of people learning Turkish in European and Middle Eastern countries due to the EU membership process of Turkey (as cited in Ünal, 2017, p. 295), the majority of Erasmus students visiting METU campus can speak no or too little Turkish. However, Tandem language dyads can benefit from each other most on condition that both parties are at a certain level in their target languages, preferably minimum B1. This is another factor that makes Tandem language pairings rather difficult.

2.3. Erasmus students' short visit and travel preferences

In their research, Gheorghe, Moraru and Anton (2017) reported "When asked about the number of occasions they [international students] had to travel during their Erasmus semester, 59,4% answered "more than 7 times". This tendency is also observed among the Erasmus students visiting METU, and it constitutes a barrier to regular Tandem meetings, leading to loss of motivation on the part of the home partner. In her interview with ODTÜ-Tandem coordinators, a Turkish Tandem participant from 2017, for example, admitted that throughout the language exchange program she always had to be the understanding party to reschedule meetings due to her partner's short trips out of Ankara.

2.4. Low number of applicants for Tandem language exchange among visiting students

Research indicates one of the most popular out-of-class activities among Turkish foreign language learners is having conversations with native speakers of Turkish (93.1 %), (Karababa & Karagül, 2013, p.368). Still, the relatively heavy workload, being in a new environment, already existing network of Turkish friends, personality, unfamiliarity with autonomous learning and lack of ECTS credits for the program could be some of the reasons why visiting students may show less interest in the program.

2.5. Participants' unfamiliarity with autonomous learning

Tandem language exchange is an autonomous learning endeavour in its essence. Students unfamiliar with this learning method cannot benefit the program much because their goal setting, sessions with their Tandem partners, materials and self-assessment may be ineffective.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges stemming mainly from the geographical location of both the university and the country where it is, METU-Tandem is an on-going program, which benefits its participants a lot. METU has always been a pioneering university and strives to serve its stakeholders at its best. Therefore, all the challenges encountered since the beginning of the program has been handled through adjustments made to it, which could be the focus of another paper. The program is and will be alive to help as many students as it can in their endeavours to have contact with native speakers of their target language because sometimes it is not the quantity but the quality that you need to consider first.



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