

The Harvard Language Exchange:
The Case for “Local” Virtual Language Learning Communities

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Abstract

The Harvard Language Center, like many academic entities impacted by the pandemic, remains in a transitional phase in 2022. Though face-to-face instruction at Harvard resumed in the fall of 2021, spaces like the Language Center continue to straddle the virtual and in-person realms. Our primary function is to provide pedagogical and technological support to language courses in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences—a mission which we have been fortunate to be able to maintain without interruption over the last two years—but our contribution to the larger Harvard community is a virtual one, rooted in language-learner autonomy. Our Language Exchange program, with a database of over 800 active users from the Harvard community, began in the spring of 2020. In our discussion of the continued development of this program, we will consider the following questions: What does it mean to connect language learners for speaking practice in the age of increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI)? What are some of the advantages and pitfalls of an autonomously run database? How can the Language Exchange bolster the language programs at Harvard? How can the platform promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB)? What is the future of the program in terms of sustainability and scale? We will also consider how best to help build a sense of “community” when dealing with a heterogeneous group of language learners and how we plan to bring back elements of in-person exchanges as we transition out of the pandemic mindset.

ハーバード・ランゲージ・センターは、パンデミックの影響を受けた多くの学術団体と同様に、2022 年も過渡的な段階にある。ハーバード大学では 2021 年秋に対面式の授業が再開されましたが、ランゲージセンターのようなスペースは、バーチャルと対面の領域にまたがって存在し続けています。私たちの主な役割は、文学部と理学部の語学コースに教育的・技術的サポートを提供することで、幸いにもこの 2 年間中断することなく続けてこられました。ハーバードのコミュニティから 800 人以上のアクティブなユーザーをデータベース化した言語交換プログラムは、2020 年の春に始まりました。このプログラムの継続的な発展についての議論では、次のような問いを考えていきます。AI がますます高度化する時代に、言語学習者をつなげて話す練習をすることの意味は何か？自律的に運用されるデータベースの利点と落とし穴は何か？ランゲージ・エクスチェンジは、ハーバード大学の言語プログラムをどのように強化することができるのか？このプラットフォームは、どのようにして多様性、公平性、包括性、帰属性を促進することができるのか？持続可能性と規模の観点から、このプログラムの将来はどうなるのか？また、異種の言語学習者のグループを扱う際に、どのように「コミュニティ」の感覚を構築するのがベストなのか、そして、パンデミックの考え方から移行する際に、どのように対面での交流の要素を復活させようと考えているのか、についても考えていきます。

Keywords: language tandems, autonomous speaking practice, DEIB

Background

The Harvard Language Exchange, in its most basic function, is a database of Harvard affiliates who wish to exchange speaking practice with other users. The authors of this article conceptualized the Language Exchange in the fall of 2019 as an answer to the shortage of university-wide programming aimed at Harvard members wishing to improve their speaking abilities in their non-native language(s). The staff of the Harvard Language Center (LC) launched the program in February 2020. Due to funding and time limitations at the time of conception, the database began as a Google spreadsheet that was populated from user responses on a Google form. The Language Exchange experienced a well-timed boost in usership in the spring of 2020 as the Harvard community was forced to social distance and shelter at home. Users could maintain—or begin to work on—their language skills through virtual meetups.

As we planned for the 2022–2023 academic year, we found ourselves still searching for a sense of equilibrium, nearly 30 months after the pandemic reshaped our professional lives. One of the most pressing questions we continue to confront is how best to support our academic community in the shift back to the in-person realm. Through our Language Exchange platform, the LC is in the unique and enviable position of serving the entire population of Harvard affiliates interested or actively engaged in language learning. The emerging question, as we more fully reinhabit physical spaces together, is how we can fully develop this platform as an instrument of inclusivity and belonging.

The LC is not a self-access language learning center, though we do hope that our Language Exchange program becomes a pathway towards becoming one. Rather, the primary mission of the LC was and continues to be to provide pedagogical and technological support to language courses in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS). From the onset of the pandemic through our resumption of in-person activities in the fall of 2021, we have been fortunate in our ability to maintain our core operations without interruption. Though face-to-face instruction resumed in the FAS last fall, almost every sector of the Harvard community (administration, faculty, staff, and student populations) has had to grapple with how much to prolong—and how much to abandon—the virtual routines developed during the height of the pandemic. Though all course meetings in the FAS are now as a matter of policy conducted in person, giving Harvard community members the option to participate in other activities at leisure and in their own preferred format is one way to help ease the transition.

The Harvard Language Exchange: Conception and Launch

Our Language Exchange program is in large part based on the answer to this question: How do we connect populations at Harvard that do not typically interact, while bolstering autonomous language practice? One does not have to dive deep to discover the extent of the nationalities and languages represented at Harvard: Not only are more than 80 languages represented in the course offerings in the FAS each year, but the university currently hosts more than 8,000 students from 150 countries (to say nothing of the international makeup of staff and faculty) (Harvard International Office, n.d.). The utility of the Language Exchange is also confirmed by its ability to reduce the boundaries between the traditionally walled-off Harvard communities. To give an idea of the scope of Harvard and the number of potential silos it contains, there are currently over 35,000 students and 17,000 staff members across 11 schools, and over 400,000 alumni globally; there are 40 departments within just the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. The Language Exchange, then, is intersectional not only in its mission to connect users from different nations and cultures, but also in its aim to cross the dividing lines between staff, faculty, and students at the University. Further, by inviting visiting scholars' spouses and partners, alumni, and retired faculty and staff to register, we hope to bring together individuals from groups that may only have a passing awareness of each other's existence.

What is the Language Exchange, in its current format? The platform is a website that allows Harvard affiliates to register for the user database, create a profile, and then search for a prospective speaking partner by language. Ideally, the user in question finds a partner who wants to enter a "tandem" that allows a true language exchange (i.e., an inverse match of language "known" and language "desired"). While it may be expected that one of the languages would be English—at an American university, at least—the multicultural and multilingual nature of Harvard's population theoretically permits an infinite number of combinations. Users can accept or decline proposed matches and opt out of the program at any time.

This Language Exchange is not unique in its basic outlines; Dickinson College's The Mixxer (<https://www.language-exchanges.org/>) and tandem.net both offer a database of language partners from around the world. Until the arrival of COVID, the LC itself was the physical space used by Harvard students in Portuguese courses for a virtual language exchange with students at UNESP (Universidade Estadual Paulista) called Teletandem. Unlike The Mixxer or Teletandem, the Language Exchange was created for the sole usage by Harvard community members,

bringing together partners with a shared sense of not only geography, but also of the academic culture at the heart of the Harvard experience. The Language Exchange was born out of a sense of the difficulties that international members of any given academic institution face when trying to both hone their language skills and find authentic social interactions. As members of a decentralized organization, Harvard affiliates may struggle to build personal relationships, to feel as though they belong in the larger community. Even within one's own department, a student or staff member may well feel isolated when opportunities for socialization are scarce, and highly competitive environments can obscure the potential for interpersonal exchanges. Since the COVID era began, this problem has only become more deeply entrenched, as society as a whole suffered the effects of prolonged isolation. By restricting access to the Exchange to Harvard users, we hope to better cross the invisible but enduring lines of demarcation between each group and to help foster a sense of intimacy and empathy among our colleagues and fellow scholars.

The Language Exchange, as we have conceived it and are promoting it, provides an opportunity for the community to engage with one another in new roles, valorizing the cultures and knowledge that each member of the community brings to the relationship. We rolled out our basic database through Google Drive in February of 2020, and launched our custom-made, Harvard IT-designed website in February of 2021. In its initial conception as a Google spreadsheet, the Language Exchange was a generic template that could be replicated by anyone with a Google account and sufficient time and patience to regulate the database's usership. When we turned to Harvard IT for a custom platform—necessarily, as our database grew and we wanted to offer more security and flexibility to our users—we discovered how little involvement was required on our part. All on their own, users registered, then searched for and found potential partners. In many ways, the timing for the publication of our online platform was fortuitous: We no doubt received a boost in usership with the onset of pandemic lockdowns and continued remote learning in 2020–2021. A possible question that prospective users of the Language Exchange may ask is whether online or smartphone-based language apps are sufficient for the needs of a self-guided language learner. While there is a plethora of virtual language-learning platforms available to the general public—and, no doubt, many Harvard affiliates who have benefitted from their existence during remote teaching and learning—there is currently no artificial intelligence (AI), no matter how sophisticated, that can take the place of authentic conversation during the process of language learning. During “conversation” with AI bots, for

example, prompts and responses are typed rather than spoken (Tu, 2020, p. 9). And while AI-generated and -supported language platforms can be useful additives in language learning, as Robert Godwin-Jones points out, *human* “virtual exchanges” are what will lead to increased cultural awareness: “personal relationships often develop through virtual exchanges. Those can serve to build a sense of global solidarity as well as intercultural competence” (Godwin-Jones, 2019, p. 10). It is the simultaneously autonomous and collaborative nature of the Language Exchange that makes it so well suited to motivated learners. Users, if they are to take full advantage of partnerships, must self-register and search for a suitable match, set up meetings, and maintain partnerships. The nature of meetings of Language Exchange partners is also mutual, but self-determined: They may meet whenever they’d like, in person or virtually. We are therefore asking for a significant buy-in on the part of users, so that they feel a sense of ownership over their linguistic journey.

To find some examples of how the Language Exchange has encouraged the breaking down of inter-school and inter-departmental barriers at Harvard, we can turn to some of the testimonials we received from participants when we reached out to them for feedback. A student in the Division of Continuing Education mentioned that she had made friends from different schools and learned about their academic, cultural, and personal experiences. A postdoctoral fellow in Applied Physics similarly said that his experience went beyond linguistic improvement; he and his partners “exchanged on [their] respective cultures” and “have become good friends.” A student at Harvard Law School, April Xu, even wrote an entire Substack newsletter entry discussing the long-lasting benefits of her relationships with her partners. Her experiences provide one of the clearest demonstrations of the value of the Language Exchange to Harvard community members:

It is always fascinating to not only chat about more mundane aspects of life, but also more specifically about my language exchange partners’ politics-related research and get to know more about what it’s like to be a visiting scholar and what it’s like to be a professor in Japan. In turn, they often ask me about life as a law student, judicial law clerk, and now, practicing attorney. It’s refreshing to be able to exchange information not only on various cultural, historical, and literary contexts, but also professional ones. (Xu, 2022)

Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, and Belonging: Creating Empathy in the Virtual Encounter

There are few, if any, Harvard-specific social platforms that are potentially as inclusive as the Language Exchange. As mentioned above, any Harvard affiliate is eligible to register, and there are no linguistic or geographic requirements; one can be a novice- or advanced-level speaker, living in Cambridge itself or residing halfway across the globe. We do not even require a true “exchange,” if it is not sought: Native speakers who are eager to reengage with their own language can simply search for a conversation partner within the database. But it is not enough simply for the platform to exist: To foster authentic understanding, we must extend the invitation to those who may have not always felt seen or welcomed. We must give Harvard affiliates the tools to not only gain invaluable experience in a second (or third, or fourth) language, but to find a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Over the last several years, much has been made in the American media of the power of insularity and “echo chambers” (Bäck et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2018); breaking through our walls often means putting ourselves in new, and sometimes uncomfortable, situations. The beauty of learning a language is that we constantly see this proven in our incremental growth, both in the language itself as well as in the expansion of our cultural horizons. The mission of the Language Exchange, then, extends beyond mere language practice. It opens doors to new ways of thinking, facilitating an encounter with the other, allowing for a new sense of empathy.

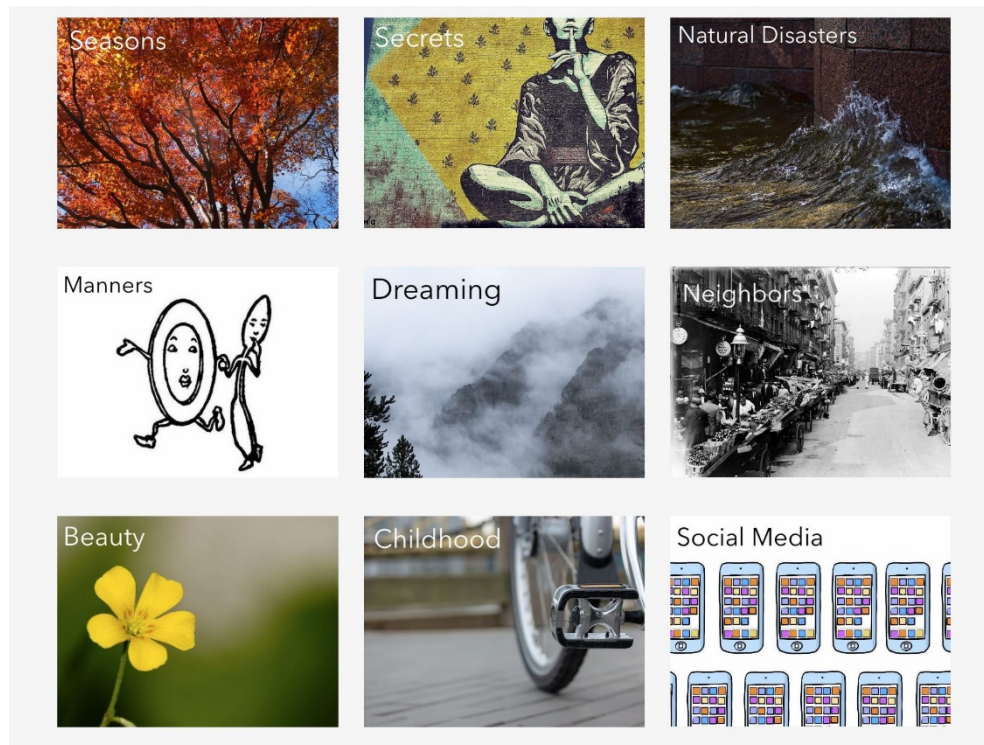
This spring, we applied to the Harvard Culture Lab Innovation Fund (HCLIF), whose mission is “to uncover solutions for pressing challenges in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.” The funding from the program is used to experiment with and expand “ideas that strive to create a culture change at Harvard” (Harvard Office for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging, n.d.). We felt that, given the scope of our audience and the multicultural and multilingual nature of the program, the Language Exchange was an ideal candidate for the HCLIF. Diversity and inclusion are essential aspects of language-learning environments, and diversity can cut across several facets of university life: “diversity among language educators and learners can refer to the representation of individuals of different race, gender, ethnic, linguistic, national, sexual, and social class identities” (Anyia & Randolph, 2019, p. 23). The Language Exchange was fortunate to receive Culture Lab funding for Fiscal Year 22–23. The challenge for us now is to determine how we can make the Language Exchange a true locus for belonging. The weakness of the Exchange, as it stands, hinges upon what could also be its

greatest strength: the existence of a broad and engaged user base. As it stands, with around 800 users and more than 350 matches, major world languages are well represented, while less commonly spoken languages have a fairly meager presence. Additionally, though we see the autonomous nature of the database as one of its greatest assets, having a global view of matches—and prospective matches—would no doubt be a useful perspective at times; arranging partnerships for those who are unaware of the best possible matches or are diffident about reaching out too widely could be a valuable service. Without attempting to change the nature of the Language Exchange platform through this type of intervention, however, we are hopeful that the HCLIF will allow us to offer users both better support and more options in terms of partners.

It is unlikely that we will be able to address every shortcoming immediately: Only time and continued growth can solve the problem of a dearth of less commonly spoken languages in the database, for example. We can, on the other hand, cast as wide a net as possible in terms of recruitment, and offer a variety of resources to those who find themselves searching for a more secure footing when starting out in a partnership. To the first point, we plan to boost our social media presence and make our database site mobile-friendly, as well as further exploring search engine optimization (SEO). The secret to reaching all the parties at Harvard one wants to reach, across the vast stretches between departments and schools, has yet to be unlocked, but we are hopeful the Language Center and the Language Exchange gain more visibility through winning the HCLIF. We are fortunate to have several partners in this endeavor: Harvard University IT designed our platform; the Harvard International Office has helped spread the word among visiting students and scholars; and finally, the undergraduate organization that represents international students in Harvard College, the Woodbridge International Society, will focus on bringing undergraduates into the fold. As we have recognized that not all participants in the Language Exchange have a background in formal language learning, we are developing a companion site to our database. This “Language Exchange User Guide” will not only offer updates about in-person events and offer language-learning resources, it will also contain several “itineraries” for users who would like some guidance when first venturing into their partnerships (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Language Exchange Companion Site Conversation “Itineraries”



A product of the diligent work of Harvard doctoral candidate Emma Zitzow-Childs, the user guide offers the possibility of continued linguistic discovery for Language Exchange participants. Users will be able to self-assess their level of proficiency based on “can-do” statements and follow the cues in the itineraries for either novice, intermediate, or advanced speakers, which they can identify themselves as within the Language Exchange platform. Signposted “grammar nuggets” will give speakers at each level the opportunity to discover and implement level-appropriate grammatical constructions (Figure 2). Though we are necessarily using English as the model for the grammatical sidebars, given Harvard’s location and the assumed “universal” language, we offer an explanation that these “nuggets” may not apply to all languages spoken in Language Exchange partnerships. When we provide materials for self-guided learning in the future, we are hoping to offer alternatives to this model.

Figure 2

Example of an Itinerary with “Grammar Nuggets”

SEASONS

Conversation itinerary

"Nostalgia in reverse, the longing for yet another strange land, grew especially strong in spring." (Vladimir Nabokov, *Mary*). How much do you associate specific places with certain seasons? Conversely, might we experience each season differently, depending on our cultural and geographical situatedness?

Novice

Icebreaker: What is your favorite season of the year, and why?

Warm-up: Describe the types of activities (athletic, cultural, traditional, religious) you regularly do during each different season.

Development: Building off the prior question, share about an activity associated with a particular season that you want to try. What must you do in order to take part in this activity? What can you do to prepare? (Ex. This winter, I want to ice skate. I must have good balance. I can practice this summer with roller skates.)

Extension: Think of four different seasonal foods typical in your culture or home country—one for each season. Explain what is in each dish and why it is traditional to eat it at that time of year.

Intermediate

Icebreaker: Choose a month of the year that best represents your personality. Explain why.

Warm-up: Sometimes, we maintain specific cultural practices to help navigate difficult seasons. For example, the Danish idea of “hygge”—a quality of coziness to get folks through long winters—has gone mainstream in popular culture. What traditions pertaining to the seasons from your culture do you wish the rest of the world knew about?

Development: Did you grow up in the Northern or Southern hemisphere? Have you experienced snow before? If so, narrate what you used to do when it snowed outside.

Extension: Sometimes certain seasons involve intense weather patterns. Share advice with your partner about what to do or not to do during these times.


Advanced

Icebreaker: T. S. Eliot famously wrote that “April is the cruellest month” (*The Wasteland*). Do you agree? Why or why not?

Warm-up: In your home culture or region, what are some things that drive you crazy about people’s behavior or habits during each different season of the year? Ex. I hate that people drive so fast in the summer.

Development: Are horoscopes taken seriously in your home culture? What qualities are supposedly associated with your birth month? What personality traits would you (allegedly) have if you had been born one month sooner or later?


Extension: John Steinbeck asked, “What good is the warmth of summer, without the cold of winter to give it sweetness?” (*Travels with Charley: In Search of America*). Do we need winter in order to truly appreciate summer? Debate with your partner.



Emma Zitzow-Childs
5:29 PM Aug 14

✓


Grammar nugget: modal verbs in the present tense



Emma Zitzow-Childs
5:42 PM Aug 14

✓


Grammar nugget: the imperfect tense



Emma Zitzow-Childs
5:47 PM Aug 14

✓


Grammar nugget: the imperative



Emma Zitzow-Childs
6:23 PM Aug 14

✓

Grammar nugget: the subjunctive



Emma Zitzow-Childs
6:23 PM Aug 14

✓

Grammar nugget: the conditional imperfect, the pluperfect

Lastly, and importantly in this transitional phase of the pandemic, we plan to host in-person events to bring a sense of balance to a program that has been, to this point, conducted almost entirely in the virtual realm. To be an autonomous learner does not mean to learn alone. Human interaction is essential to realizing the great possibilities of linguistic exchange. With that in mind, we would like to invite users to our physical space, if they are willing, so that they have an even greater sense of belonging to a community of language learners. This use of space will likely range from the ability to reserve rooms for meetings of Language Exchange partners or participants in language tables, to more targeted activities, such as ice-breaker sessions and workshops with invited speakers.

Conclusion: Beyond the Language Exchange

Mindful as we are of the importance of contributing to our community, we must ask ourselves how we will continue to serve Harvard not only at the level of the individual, but also at the institutional level. Though the University continues to offer a wide range of language courses, the language departments have not been spared the crisis of declining enrollments of the last decade (Looney & Lusin, 2019). The Language Center cannot single-handedly bring back an era of flourishing language classrooms, but we can act as a gateway for Language Exchange users to become more deeply invested in their growth as speakers and to spread the word about their positive experiences. In conjunction with and beyond the Language Exchange itself, then, we are in the planning phase of offering self-access language learning materials to Harvard members, primarily for less commonly spoken languages. Because we are not currently and have never been a self-access learning center, this initiative would allow the Language Center to broaden its mission and to reimagine how we can serve Harvard community members. In our role as the general representatives for language learning at Harvard, we can continue to serve the community by granting greater access to language resources. We hope that the Language Exchange acts as an inspiration for users to seek further linguistic challenges, and a means to help knit the Harvard community together in ways that have heretofore not been attempted.

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