

Chapter 23

Practising Language Interaction via Social Networking Sites: The Expert Student's Perspective on Personalized Language Learning

Marina Orsini-Jones
Coventry University, UK

Billy Brick
Coventry University, UK

Laura Pibworth
Coventry University, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on the evaluation of language learning SNSs carried out by “expert students” who are training to become Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. While stressing the positive features available on these sites and novel ways in which they can enable personalised language learning, this study also focuses on some troublesome aspects that occur when learners engage with Web 2.0 tools. It discusses how initial motivation towards these tools can turn into frustration, mirroring the results of a previous autoethnographic study carried out on SNSs. It also illustrates how these global ubiquitous platforms pose a dilemma for language practitioners who work within institutional teaching settings. Teachers recognize the language learning potential of these tools, but are also worried by the ethical threat they can pose, which can normally be avoided, or at least moderated, within institutional proprietary and “less exciting” platforms.

INTRODUCTION

De Freitas and Conole (2010), quoted in Conole and Alevizou (2010, p. 9), propose that there are five technological trends that are likely to have a significant impact on higher education:

1. A shift towards ubiquitous and networked technologies.
2. The emergence of context and location aware devices.
3. The increasingly rich and diverse different forms of representations and stimulatory environments possible.

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4. A trend towards more mobile and adaptive and devices.
5. A technological infrastructure which is global, distributed, and interoperable.

The above trends would appear to have already impacted on language learning with reference to how individual learners decide to engage in autonomous and personalized learning in a global way. This is illustrated by the websites of a language learning *Social Networking Site* (SNS) like *busuu*, which claims to be Europe's largest Web 2.0 language learning community, with over 5 million users at the time of writing (March 2012). It offers online study in 9 languages (from CEFR – Common European Framework of Reference – A1 to B2 levels) and has also made available a phone-app that, according to the *busuu* website, has already been downloaded more than five million times (Busuu, 2012).

Livemocha, another SNS for language learning which, like *busuu*, is now also available as a link within the generic, but ubiquitous, *Facebook*, which claims to be “The World's Largest Language Learning Community” and to have over twelve million members from over one hundred and ninety five countries at the time of writing (Livemocha, 2012). Even if, as pointed out by Brick (2011, p. 22) “there are no statistics available to indicate how many of these users are active on the site on a regular basis,” the figures are substantial. They would appear to indicate that the innovative generic and every-day life social-collaborative modes of interaction that were successfully pioneered by *Facebook*, are now being disseminated to subject specific Internet areas, where every-day-life social interaction and educational co-construction of knowledge are becoming increasingly blurred. Brick (2011) argues that SNSs could be classified as “disruptive technologies,” in the way the expression is used by Godwin-Jones (2005) referring to Skype and Podcasting, in that they allow for new and different ways of doing familiar tasks.

Conole and Alevizou (2010) state that the learner experience with Web 2.0 tools has been the object of various studies and that there are not enough studies reporting on the teachers' perspective on them. The distinctive feature of this study is that it reports on the language learning experience with SNSs of “expert learners” in a Higher Education setting in the UK. Students were asked to engage with SNSs and to evaluate their experience from the point of view of future teachers, as they were studying a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) degree, some at undergraduate final year level and some at postgraduate level (MA in English Language Teaching). Individuals from both groups carried out autoethnographic studies, recording their experience about specific aspects of SNSs, while learning via the above mentioned *globally connected* platforms in a personal way and recorded their autonomous language learning journeys.

This study will focus on language learning SNSs, *busuu* and *Livemocha* in particular.

It will also explore the darker side of the engagement with these tools, as students can meet *online friends*, but also *online foes* and it will reiterate that digital literacies must be developed within an ethical and academic framework in Higher Education.

It will start by discussing whether or not features of these *disruptive platforms* should be incorporated into mainstream language learning education. In some respects, these technologies can empower learners and enhance their digital literacy as well as their language proficiency, but in others, they appear to propose trite content and pedagogically unsound models. Teachers should not just be passively accepting new technologies into their pedagogy, but be prepared with the skills and information to be able to “choose, use and in some cases refuse technology for their students” (Chapelle, 2006), and have a clear idea of both the strengths and the limitations of any tool available for both teaching and learning (Levy & Stockwell, 2006, p. 2).

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