

Chapter 91

The Role of Social Networking Sites for Language Learning in UK Higher Education: The Views of Learners and Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to assess the potential for Social Networking Sites (SNSs) to play a role in language learning in the UK Higher Education (HE) sector. These sites are characterised by certain features including learning materials, synchronous and asynchronous video and text chat facilities, a peer review feature, and some sites also incorporate an award system, in the form of points (<http://www.livemocha.com>) or 'berries' (<http://www.busuu.com>). This serves to motivate participants by rewarding them for their progress and for their peer review activities. In order to consider if, or how, to integrate SNSs into the UK HE curriculum it is important to consider the views of practitioners and learners towards such sites and whether they consider them to have a potential role in HE language education. The paper will report on the outcomes of two small research projects which have sought to establish the view of both practitioners and students towards SNSs in the HE context. When considered overall the practitioners were more positive about the site than the learners.

INTRODUCTION

Educators have begun to discuss the effects of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005) on higher education. McLaughlin and Lee (2008) propose a dynamic student-led 'Pedagogy 2.0' curriculum which offers opportunities for learners to connect, share and discuss ideas (Conole & Alevizou, 2010, p. 10)

and to challenge centralized models of learning. McLaughlin and Lee (2008, p. 1) define Pedagogy 2.0 as integrating 'Web 2.0 tools that support knowledge sharing, peer-to-peer networking, and access to a global audience with socioconstructivist learning approaches to facilitate greater learner autonomy, agency, and personalization.' SNSs for language learning allow learners to share

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knowledge through peer-reviewed activities and enable them to network internationally through language exchange. Furthermore, SNSs allow learners to personalise their learning and increase their autonomy by being able to access the sites at any time of the day or night.

The utilisation of Web 2.0 tools leads to individual learner empowerment (Rogers et al., 2007; Sims, 2006; Sheely, 2006) and provides the opportunity for the development of personal Learning Environments (PLEs). However, Banyard, Underwood, Kerlin, and Stiller (2011) argue that although PLEs have clear benefits in terms of communication and collaboration, their benefits in terms of learning should not be taken for granted. Gouseti (2010, p. 351) has described educational technology as 'fickle and faddish' and argued that, 'Like many technologies before them, the educational potentials of these Web 2.0 tools have attracted much enthusiasm, excitement, hope and – it must be said – a fair amount of hyperbole.'

Chaka (2011) argues that it is necessary to move away from pilot projects towards more longitudinal studies to evaluate the usefulness and effectiveness of Web 2.0 technologies and states that, 'They need to demonstrate their added value and effectiveness as media of choice to teaching and learning' (p. 54). Bax (2011) continues in this sceptical vein and concludes that, 'It is too easy to be seduced by apparently more friendly and more popular elements of education, which might be cheaper to provide and may get higher satisfaction ratings and wider smiles in the short term' (p. 255).

The ever increasing growth and speed of the internet has massively increased on-line language learning (see, for example, Levy & Stockwell, 2006; Recker, Dorward, & Nelson, 2004; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007), and the recent emergence of SNSs designed specifically for language learning has transformed this environment by providing enriched opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous interaction (Brick, 2011). Furthermore, new apps for mobile devices

by the two market leaders, Livemocha and Busuu, now enable learners to access and synchronise SNS language learning whenever and wherever they wish.

SNSs for language learning are examples of what Godwin-Jones (2005) describes as 'disruptive technologies' as they allow learners to undertake familiar tasks in new and different ways. One of the features enables learners to engage in language exchange via video-conferencing with native speakers of their target language. The peer review feature is equally ground breaking, allowing learners to correct each other's written submissions on the site. Another affordance of SNSs for language learning is the critical mass of hundreds of thousands of learners on-line throughout the day and night, making it extremely likely that learners can find language exchange partners with relative ease.

The precise characteristics of SNSs for language learning vary. Some sites serve primarily as a repository for learning materials, including contributions from members (<http://www.italki.com>), others allow teachers to register and offer lessons via a learning platform (<http://www.learn2lingo.com>). A few (Busuu and Livemocha) offer both learning materials and a platform for networking and language exchange.

In order for foreign language teachers to harness the full potential of these sites in their teaching, and to offer informed advice to learners regarding their suitability for autonomous language learning, it is important that they understand how these sites function and what their strengths and weaknesses are. However, Wang (2012, p. 32) highlights the fact that some teachers, although comfortable using technology for their own use, may face challenges using it appropriately in teaching.

There have been several studies aimed at establishing the affordances of SNSs for language learning including the quality of the learning materials but most of these have focused on Livemocha rather than Busuu. Harrison and Thomas's (2009) investigation was generally positive; it focused on a

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