

Chapter 37

Learning Languages via Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a study of seven learners who logged their experiences on the language learning social networking site Livemocha over a period of three months. The features of the site are described and the likelihood of their future success is considered. The learners were introduced to the Social Networking Site (SNS) and asked to learn a language on the site. They were positive about two aspects of the site: the immediate peer-feedback available and the ability to converse synchronously and asynchronously with native speakers of their target language. However, there was universal criticism of the “word-list”-based language learning materials, and several participants complained about the regular cyber-flirting they encountered. Other aspects of the site including accessibility, ease of use, syllabus, activities, and relationships with other members are also considered. The potential for integrating some of the features of SNSs for language learning into the Higher Education (HE) curriculum and the implications of this for educators are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In language teaching there has been a long tradition of encouraging learners to use the target language to communicate with others, in their own time. Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) supports this approach, by emphasising the interdependence of individuals and the importance of group processes in the co-construction of knowledge.

Originally one of the ways that teachers advocated collaborative language learning was through penpalling, and then, with the advent of the internet, through keypalling (Choi & Nesi, 1999).

Most recently social networking sites (SNSs) such as Livemocha have sprung up, offering learners the opportunity to practise the target language with other members of the online community. In order for foreign language educators to evaluate and harness the potential of these sites it would be useful for them to know more about how they work.

Integrating SNSs into the classroom faces some practical obstacles including the lack of control that many tutors have over the curricula, and the fact that language courses are often taught by a number of tutors who do not necessarily coordinate their efforts to ensure a degree of consistency. In

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addition to this there are wider questions which create tensions (JISC, 2009) including the lack of clear policies if a site that a course is reliant on ceases to operate, the lack of experienced learning technologists who have an understanding of Web 2.0 technologies, and the technical difficulties that face those with institutional support responsibilities to integrate tools which have been developed and maintained externally (Conole & Alevizou 2010, p.84). A further obstacle is the fact that the majority of language classes are introductory, and although SNS messages might sometimes seem superficial, they require advanced pragmatic knowledge that beginners are likely to lack (Furman et al., 2007).

McLaughlin and Lee (2008) propose a dynamic student-led 'Pedagogy 2.0' curriculum, but institutional constraints make such flexibility problematic. Pedagogy 2.0 has emerged from the Web 2.0 movement and its innovative use of social software tools which offer opportunities for people to connect, share and discuss ideas (Conole & Alevizou, p10) and to challenge previous centralized models of learning. McLaughlin and Lee (2008) 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." The approach leads to individual learner empowerment (Rogers et al. 2007; Sims 2006; Sheely 2006) and the development of learners' Personal Learning Environments (PLEs).

Godwin Jones (2005, p.9) has referred to SNSs as "disruptive technologies" in that they allow for new and different ways of doing familiar tasks." They have the potential to transform language learning by offering synchronous and asynchronous interaction, and speaking, writing, reading and listening activities at a time and place of learners' own choosing (McBride, 2009). Although SNS contact is not face-to-face it is authentic communication with native speakers, something

which was previously difficult to replicate in the language classroom. The peer-review features and the oral practice opportunities afforded by SNSs have been praised by users such as the bloggers, 'Street-Smart Language Learning' (2010) and 'Fluent in 3 months' (2010). Lloyd (2012) has also suggested that platforms such as these, with the collaboration of tutors, could be utilised to bridge the gap between formal and informal language learning.

A recent report (Johnson et al., 2010) identified the following three trends as key drivers of technology adoption in HE between 2010 and 2015:

- The abundance of online resources and relationships, inviting a rethink of the educators' role
- An increased emphasis on ubiquitous, just-in-time, augmented, personalised and informal learning
- Greater collaboration between students

These predictions map across to features of SNSs for language learning, as can be seen from the overview of Livemocha.com provided below, and this suggests that more widespread adoption of SNSs for language learning is about to take place.

The Affordances of SNSs for Language Learning

Attitudes towards the use of SNSs for learning in HE in the UK can be summarised by the findings of a recent report (JISC, 2009):

Yet technology-enhanced learning remains a source of concern for institutions. This finding may reflect the extent to which supporting such practice makes demands on institutional resources[...]. Access, especially to the internet and social software, may have increased, but this does not mean that technology is always used to its best advantage, either by teachers or learners.

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