

Chapter 4

An Investigation of Social Networking Sites for Language Learning and the User Experience: The Case of Busuu and Spanish as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the user experience of the language learning platform Busuu as a tool for learning Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL). Social constructionism has been highlighted by previous research as the theory on which Busuu is based, however, Álvarez concluded that Busuu constitutes an ecological system of nested semiotic spaces where pedagogical elements and principles from different theories of language learning interweave in complementary ways. Following a review of existing research, the chapter analyses data arising from a study involving a mixed group of university students who used the premium version of Busuu for four weeks. Data were collected via pre- and post-tests, a user experience questionnaire, and individual interviews, and were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Findings suggest that Busuu did not fully satisfy the requirements of a social network in terms of ease of participation, communication, and collaboration. Further research is required to explore the implications of usability testing for the design of effective SNSLL.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of Web 2.0 applications strategies used by language learners to interact on social networking sites (SNS) have been a topic of growing interest to researchers in second language acquisition (SLA) and teacher education (Lamy & Zourou, 2013; Liu et al., 2015). Lee (2006), for example, argued that the frequency with which language learners use SNS may have a positive impact on their oral proficiency, vocabulary acquisition and syntactic complexity. Moreover, Blattner and Lomicka (2012) suggested that the social interaction that takes place in such environments may help students to develop their pragmatic competence. Lin, Warschauer and Blake (2016) inferred that dedicated social networking sites for language learning (SNSLL), rather than generic social networks such as Facebook, may enable language learners to have their first experience of using their L2 in meaningful conversations with others. While this potential seems promising, several challenges have also been identified in the research, including as Jones (2001) has pointed out, that it may be difficult for SNSLL platforms to engage language learners over a long period of time without teachers or peers to drive the process. Moreover, because the focus is often on social interaction, traditional areas that require in-depth knowledge, such as grammar instruction or pronunciation, may be under-represented in SNSLL course materials.

Founded in 2008 as a social network for language learning, Busuu defines itself as “the world’s largest social network for language learning, providing courses in 12 different languages on web and mobile to more than 90 million learners worldwide” (<https://www.busuu.com>). Busuu promotes itself as a platform that enables learners to train their language skills through self-paced learning units following the Common Framework of Reference (CEFR) from A1 to B2 levels. In 2016, Busuu migrated to a mobile compatible platform and began to attract more research studies (Álvarez, 2016; Vesselinov & Grego, 2016), though its functionality remained quite limited in that language learners could only create a profile, upload content and receive feedback. While Busuu has a significant base of language users, it has attracted limited research to date. This chapter is significant in that it provides an extensive review of the growing body of research on social networks for language learning in order to contextualise Busuu, before investigating original data arising from an empirical study of the SNSLL through the lens of user-experience in order to explore the pedagogical principles underpinning the network’s design.

BACKGROUND

In their history of SNS, boyd and Ellison (2008) explained that since 1997, at least 45 SNSs had been created. While some general SNS at that time were used by language learners to practise foreign languages, founded in 2007, Livemocha is commonly regarded as the first dedicated SNSLL of its kind (Brick, 2011a, 2013). This was later followed by Babbel in the same year, Busuu in 2008, and Wespeke in 2010. Table 1 lists social media that are commonly identified to be SNS.

While all of the social media listed in Table 1 are generally considered to be SNSLL, particularly Duolingo and Memrise, none of them offers the *sine qua non* pre-requisite of a social network, namely, the opportunity for learners to engage in full social interaction as defined by Boyd and Ellison (2008).

As Table 2 shows, there were already approximately five different language exchange sites before the creation of Livemocha in 2007. These SNSLL were based on the principle of key-palling (e.g., the use of email to conduct pen-friending relationships) as the concept of an online social network did not exist at the time. The most important SNSLL at the time, SharedTalk, does not exist anymore and the

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