The use of social networking sites for foreign language learning: An autoethnographic study of *Livemocha*

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Despite their spectacular growth in both daily life and mainstream education, little research to date has been conducted concerning the use of social networking sites in foreign language learning. The aim of this study, therefore, is to examine the use of such sites to learn a foreign language. Using an auto-ethnographic approach that included self-aware participation, learner diaries and peer debriefing, we investigated the social networking site *Livemocha* to study Korean from our perspectives as native speakers and experienced teachers of English. Specifically, we focused our questions on aspects of socio-collaborative principles and practice. Results of a grounded, thematic analysis indicate that the site had number of counter-productive pedagogical impediments to language learning that included, for example, flaws in site design. We conclude our paper with suggestions for improved foreign language learning through social networking sites.

Keywords: Computer-assisted language learning, autoethnography, socio-collaborative learning

Introduction

As in many other areas of higher education, the growth in global computer networks has spurred a massive increase in online foreign language learning (see, for example, Levy & Stockwell, 2006; Recker, Dorward & Nelson, 2004; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). Far beyond earlier stand alone tutorial applications, the interactive abilities of computer-mediated communication tools has prompted the study of language learning in text-based chat, massively multiple online gaming and mobile devices (Sykes, Oskoz & Thorne, 2008.). To date, however, the use of social networking sites to learn a foreign language has been little investigated, and the pedagogical assumptions behind their use have been called into question (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). In this study, then, we set out to examine how online social networking sites may be used to acquire a language. After a survey of several language exchange and social language learning sites, we decided to investigate *Livemocha* [http://www.livemocha.com]. Perhaps the largest and most popular of this rapidly expanding category, *Livemocha* is a social networking site that advertises itself as the "world's largest community of native speakers eager to help and learn from each other—and that's what makes *Livemocha* so addictive and effective." Critically reviewed, is the site truly 'addictive and effective'? If so, why?

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In this paper, we first review current theory related to computer-assisted language learning and social networking sites. Next, we discuss auto-ethnography, and its associated techniques, to research. From there, we describe the 2009 *Livemocha* site, our data collection processes and methods of analysis. We then set out our results and some implications of our study, before discussing areas of improved practice and further research.

For van Lier (2004), language articulates the relations between people and the world and as such, context is central and 'ecological'; accordingly, there is no reason to teach or learn de-contextualized or prescriptive grammars. Nonetheless, linguistic accuracy is important (Ellis, 2008), and thus Felix (2005) has called for a mix of social and cognitive constructivist approaches to language acquisition. By combining the two approaches, learners can be exposed to a range of activities that promote increasingly complex automated responses, engage in autonomous learning and simultaneously develop both cognitive and metacognitive processes.

The combined approaches integrate well within an ecological perspective, which considers learning to be "a non-linear, relational activity, co-constructed between humans and their environment" (Kramsch 2002, p. 5). For Kramsch, there are two common metaphors that are used in second language acquisition. In the first one, learners are parts of mechanism with inputs and outputs; in the second metaphor, the learners are apprentices in a community of practice. However, an ecological perspective posits a new metaphor, situating learners as being part of a living organism, and it is interaction with the environment that encourages development (van Lier, 2004). This metaphor brings frames of reference from other disciplines into the complex relationship. The complexity of a learning environment can be exemplified from an ecological perspective by the ability of the learner to shift frames of reference.

According to Kramsch (2002), the ecological nature of language learning relies on three assumptions: 1) Complexity, as communication involves interpreting meaning at various levels, various levels of detail, and in multiple semiotic and idiolectal forms; 2) Non-linearity, as learning is co-constructed between humans and their environments and development is mediated by activity; 3) Inter-connectivity, because an individual's emotional and motivational character situates the learner within a social and professional community of language users.

In consideration of these three assumptions there are many ways of explaining the various levels on which language, learners and the language learning environments interact. In complex, non-linear systems only the interactions of the individual components of the systems are meaningful (Kramsch, 2002). The learner is no longer perceived as an empty vessel absorbing the information passed on by the teacher but rather as a member of a learning ecosystem (van Lier, 2004).

As it moves further away from behaviourist to socio-cultural approaches then, foreign language instruction increasingly seeks to foster interactions within a community of learners (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008). For years, theorists have recognized that networked computers can potentially offer a rich environment for socio-cultural language learning (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Jee & Park, 2009). Social networking sites, as Ryberg and Christiansen (2008) have shown can support language acquisition by offering an opportunity to learn through observation before mastering an understanding. This leads to gaining confidence and becoming a legitimate, recognised member of the community, which then allows the learner to encourage and enable learning within the community, by being teachers themselves.

Method

Autoethnographic approaches to research

Since the 1930s, large-scale diary studies have been conducted in a range of fields, notably psychology, anthropology, education, sociology and applied linguistics (Lazaraton, 1995). Diary studies have been used, too, to analyse various forms of interaction with emerging technologies (Lee, 2001; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007) and are particularly useful to examine events in their natural context to obtain reliable, person-level information and to gauge changes within a person or other participants over time (Bolger, Davis & Rafaeli,. 2003; Numrich, 1996).

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Nonetheless, autoethnographic approaches may be considered to be unstructured, uncontrolled and, because they are centred on the self, necessarily subjective and anecdotal. Despite such criticisms, however, Etherington (2004, p. 41) defends such a method as a "familiar and useful way of conducting research that legitimises and encourages the inclusion of the researchers self and culture as an ethical and politically sound approach." As with other qualitative techniques, Lazaraton (1995) notes, legitimate methods are *rigorous* when considering conceptual standards such as dependability, credibility, confirmability and transferability.

Livemocha

The language learning site *Livemocha* was launched in September 2007 in an attempt to change the way people learn language. By incorporating a range of free interactive online lessons, supported by a community of online native speakers and a range of foreign language learners, Livemocha sought to provide an environment of total immersion in the language. One year later, in September 2008, the site announced that it had over one million registered learners from around the globe. In March 2009, Pearson Education who currently have over 20 million students learning through programs developed by Longman, announced a partnership with *Livemocha*. Pearson launched a revamped site in August 2009 (note that, in this study, we limit our investigation to a study period of June-July 2009).

The use of the site is initially free of charge, with options to purchase paid content, and once users have received notice of their account's activation they have access to lessons in most languages with full support for learners of six major languages, as well as learning tools such as flashcards, created by learners and teachers in the site. Motivational aids, known as 'mochapoints', provide incentive.

Participants

In this study, we undertook an auto-ethnographic approach in line with others (e.g., Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Etherington, 2004) who record their own experiences and interpret data reflexively to better understand an experience. Collectively, we have worked as ESL teachers of over 30 years and have been introduced to a diverse array of learner and teacher concerns and issues. We have taught students at all levels and streams according to their needs, employing a range of approaches and methodologies. With classroom and onsite experience ranging from business classes, special purposes classes, cultural classes, testing and exam preparation, we have encountered a wide range of language learning situations both in Australia and overseas, including Mali, Indonesia, England, United States, China, Japan and South Korea.

To explain, we both initiated studies on *Livemoch*a. Clark initiated a study of Korean, and Gruba began to (re)learn Japanese. After a few sessions, however, Gruba chose not continue to study but rather helped Clark to reflect, debrief and analyse data from his personal experiences of the social networking site.

Clark recorded all of his language learning experiences using *Livemocha* in three phases. The first phase consisted of registering and enrolling as a language learner and language teacher in the website. On the website he was presented in real terms, that is to say he enrolled in the course and shared his identity as he was and did not use pseudonyms other than the account name which necessitates using a 'nick name'. This was done to maintain transparency in the case study by providing a transparent context from which to research. His details were provided for other users of the site to view openly, in order to make decisions about whether it would be appropriate to make contact.

The second phase was a four week study of Korean as presented in the *Livemocha* website. With no prior experience of learning Korean the *Livemocha* course was undertaken beginning at Unit 1, Lesson 101. Time spent interacting on the site could vary from between 1 hour to 7 hours per day. This was dependent on ecological considerations such as the complexity of the lesson content, the types of interaction engaged in and the availability of other learners online to communicate with. During each lesson online, detailed notes on the content were taken for later reference. The notes were recorded in three forms, Korean orthographic script (or Hangeul), a broad phonemic transcription to enable verbal reproduction of the utterances, and finally an English translation. These three forms of transcriptions are consistent with notes that are taken for learners who are absolute beginners when learning a language.

Using the principles outlined by Bolger et al. (2004) of employing an *event-based* autoethnographic design, details and impressions of the experiences encountered were recorded during and after each lesson, and also after any other interaction with other learners on the site as either an English language teacher, or a Korean language Learner. Both the lesson notes and personal impressions were then collated into one detailed 'learner journal' to provide rich data for analysis.

In phase three, a 'thematic analysis' involved two analysts, Clark and second researcher (an experienced ESL teacher and Master's degree student), reading through the learner journal and identifying broad themes. We held ourselves to working with the issue of returning to the site and continued study. From the start, we wondered if the site was 'addictive and effective' as advertised. Were the site's features and social interactions motivating? What were some of the barriers to learning online in a community? Would we come back after a month of study? After the broad themes were produced they were cross-referenced and the prevalence of the reason for the emergence of each theme was tabulated, conferring the reasons with the second analyst. By having two researchers analyse the data, the dependability and credibility of the research was increased as triangulation occurring through the eyes of another researcher allowed a different 'frame of reference' within the context of language learning, providing varied perspectives from which to interpret the data.

Discussion of themes

Staying focused on continued use, three themes emerged in the analysis: motivation, frustration and demotivation. In this section, we discuss each of these themes and then set out suggestions for improvement.

Motivation

The first theme to emerge in the research was, understandably, motivation. With each new emerging possibility, Clark recorded higher levels of interest. Interests were triggered, for example, by using Korean to actually communicate, exploring the new site, and reading the new language for the first time. The submission system for *Livemocha,* in which learners write or record themselves speaking and submit their work for others to comment, stimulated a sense of community.

Another key area that provided immediate motivation was the ability on *Livemocha* to quickly (immediately as a result of activating the account) make 'friends'. Meeting others within the site to communicate with about language learning and language was instantly rewarding and highly encouraging. As a result of meeting people within the site the chatting, call and video call system that *Livemocha* employs as part of it pedagogical design motivates people to interact in a variety of ways. Although the technology is not specific to *Livemoch*a, the combined pedagogy and the technology have what Stockwell (2007) refers to as a 'symbiotic relationship' where the emergence of new technologies creates pedagogical ideas and vice versa.

With regard to chatting, Clark felt a lot more comfortable and therefore motivated with chatting, rather than calling and video calling. There are various reasons for this. The call and video call functions allow another learner to communicate with you directly and when meeting someone for the first time, paralinguistic features of communication can be disconcerting across cultures. Video call especially, when used with beginners of languages can be disconcerting as there are almost no boundaries and there is constant pressure to communicate. However, chatting does allow time for learners to process input and produce output. Clark found that the communication process was smoother as well. This is concordant with Lee (2001) who found in her research that when chatting on-line it often becomes immediately clear to the learner, when output is incomprehensible, because a request is made to clarify the meaning of what was previous written. Such instances of feedback also assist in acquiring second language syntax.

There was a high degree of motivation around completion of tasks. *Livemocha* employs a 'progress bar' at the top of the screen, which depicts the percentage of lesson completion. The lessons take between 3 to 5 hours to complete when taking notes and the feeling of completing a lesson leads to a renewed sense of vigour with the language study. *Livemocha* also awards 'mochapoints' for finishing lessons and displays the final score achieved in the review section of the lesson. All of these features increased motivation when

learning a language. In all, approximately 70% of the time was independent learning and the remainder was social.

Helping by leaving comments for other learners is a motivating experience as it provides opportunities for learners to interact with others at their own pace while having the opportunity to meet and be introduced to other learners and other languages. This feature which allows learners to record themselves speaking or write a task for others to comment is probably the most useful feature of the site and one of the most popular features. Following analysis, we came up with a range of suggestions to encourage motivation (Table 1).

Table 1: Suggestions for the improvement of pedagogy: Motivation

Issue	Pedagogic Implication	Suggestions for improvement of Pedagogy
Impetus to continue	Learners enjoy completing tasks	Having a wider range of tasks will further improve motivation.
Opportunities for use of the foreign language	Learners can communicate with each other within the site	Being able to use the target language is important
Chatting allows time to think how to use the foreign language	Chatting is very useful for lower level learners in gaining confidence with the L2	Being able to type the target language and negotiate new forms is essential in the chat interaction.
Helping raises awareness and introduces learners to others	Submissions are a useful tool for understanding the needs of other learners and their languages.	Being able to assist other learners is very useful in establishing metacognitive strategies and awareness.
Being introduced to native speakers of a language and other learners is highly motivating	Meeting and communicating with people is the purpose of learning a language.	Being able to communicate with others is essential in language learning.

Frustration

Frustration in learning emerged as a key issue over the four-week period and by far the greatest concern was the lesson content. Despite the great advances in theoretical perspectives of language learning and second language acquisition, combined with the massive spike in technological innovation of the last ten years, it was largely frustrating to return to the 1970s listening laboratories and see the audio-lingual method still being the chosen form of presentation. Encountering lessons of decontextualised grammar, which can only then be translated (harking back to even earlier theoretical perspectives), was frustrating to the extent that it affected Clark's motivation and ability to learn, especially when considering that the site promotes itself as a social networking site. As Felix (2005) explains, when students are performing tasks that are intended to be meaningful and contextualised, it is counterproductive to include impersonal, decontextualised materials.

The design of the lesson content did not seem to be appropriate for the needs of the learners. Translating decontextualised classroom materials across a range of languages goes against the work of most pedagogical theory. Hampel (2006) concluded that while some features of face-to-face classroom tasks can be adapted for use in CMC, factors that depend on the specific materiality of the resources, and on the affordances of the modes available also have to be factored in when designing and implementing tasks for an online classroom. Livemocha did not succeed in utilising the presentation of language and the available modes of communication for the benefit of learners.

Another area of frustration was the level of interaction in the lessons. The lessons, as presented, are very fixed. They do not, for example, contain help menus or items that assist the learners in using the language for a purpose other than the 'translation button', which provides a translation of what is heard. Lee (2001) showed the importance for learners to have the opportunity to observe and take note of features of linguistic importance to them in structures and attempt to modify the input. Simply receiving input without

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negotiated interaction is not sufficient.

There were a number of issues that were concerned with the site's treatment of the Hangeul characters. Initially, learning to read Hangeul script was a frustrating experience as learning was only 'top-down' and consisted of reading and transcribing an entire phrase. As there was no explicit instruction of the Hangeul 'alphabet', over the four weeks was to recognise 'chunks' of characters, which then encourages the learner to make assumptions about the pronunciation and meaning of the characters. During the research period when Clark found a flashcard chart produced by another learner it was surprising to find that a lot of the assumptions about the pronunciation of characters and their relationship to each other were wrong, which was a frustrating situation for learners to be placed in.

The concern of transcription might have been lessened had the site included instructions and support for typing in Hangeul. The site's help menu only had a listing for using an international keyboard layout and recommended two virtual keyboard sites, neither of which at that time supported Korean. The first issue of not learning how to type in Korean in the presentation was further compounded by the necessity of learning to type in order to communicate in a chat. Without support for chatting, cutting and pasting expressions into the chat box became necessary, which limited negotiation of the output including the possibility of making mistakes to have corrected later.

Another area of frustration with a high prevalence in the lessons was the way in which Livemocha dealt with pronunciation of the expressions, by encouraging learners to write using Romanisation of Hangeul. As various attempts by academics to standardise Hangeul have been met with widespread resistance (Chung 2007) it is illogical to expect users untrained in linguistics to produce standardised forms without a specified system. By having a very broad phonemic pronunciation produced by learners, there is also a greater opportunity for the submission to be misinterpreted or simply incorrect. The site doesn't use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) chart at all. Frustration can be minimized in several ways (Table 2).

Table 2: Suggestions for the improvement of pedagogy: Frustration

Issue	Pedagogic implication	Suggestions for improvement of Pedagogy
Use of the audio-lingual method	The method is not compatible with the technological features	Implement a combined cognitive and social constructivist or at least integrated methodology
De-contextualised vocabulary	The learners are unable to use the vocabulary within the environment	Provide target language that is likely to be used in the environment
Interaction	Without interaction in the environment of the lesson, the language can not be negotiated	Provide the ability to communicate with others during the presentation stage of the lesson
Non-negotiated, top-down only	Recognising whole sentences does not assist in recognition of form.	Include a focus on form to exemplify what is being presented in the lesson
Transcription – stroke order	Without an understanding of stroke order, ineffective writing habits are formed.	Introduce the character system and the order of the strokes as part of the first series of lessons
Transcription - Typing	Without in-site help for being able to type in Korean chatting and writing submissions is not possible.	A virtual keyboard or link to lessons on typing in other languages is vitally important in online learning environments
Transliteration - pronunciation	Without a standard for transliteration advising pronunciation is confusing.	Although the issue of transliteration of Korean is a complex one it cannot be ignored; Providing a general standard is preferable to no standard at all
Inaccurate advice	Without knowing the level of the learner it is not possible to	Displaying the level of the learner with the learner's name will greatly

	grade language to improve communication of advice	assist in providing appropriate advice

Demotivation

In contrast to encountering many instances of positive encouragement, a strong theme of 'demotivation' emerged in the process of data analysis for a number of reasons. First and foremost, perhaps, there were times when for one reason or another there were periods where Clark experienced quite simply a 'lack of motivation'. These may have occurred as a result of frustrations encountered with the site or it's operation, having worked hard the day before and becoming tired of doing similar tasks repeatedly and external factors such as responsibilities outside the scope of this research taking precedence. When considering language learning to be an organic process and thinking in terms of ecological models (Kramsch, 2002) it is not natural to expect motivational levels to remain constant.

There were some effects of demotivation encountered in terms of the difficulty level of Korean in relation to English. While there are some indications from other research that 'language distance' (Cenoz, Hufeisen & Jessner, 2001) may have affected the results in this study, perhaps having a demotivating effect on learning, there was an awareness of the level of difficulty from the outset, and this perhaps tempered demotivation to an extent, lessening the effect.

The time required to complete a lesson was demotivating. Although each lesson was not overtly lengthy when considering that lessons in an ESL classroom can be four hours daily, the major difference is that classroom lessons are not four straight hours of decontextualised grammar practice. The length of time also related to the time that it took to transcribe the Hangeul script. The transcription was a lengthy process from the very beginning and as there was no support from the site as to how to type using Hangeul the entire process was demotivating.

As a teacher, there were a lot of times when commenting on the submissions of other learners simply felt 'too much like work'. By the end of the four-week period in which this study took place, Clark calculated that it was possible to spend five hours a week correcting submissions of 'friends'. This may have been worth the effort if accumulated 'mochapoints' were redeemable in some way. However, spending five hours a week unpaid for little benefit was both tiresome and demotivating once an initial motivation of helping other learners disappeared.

Over the course of the research there was a prevalence of feeling dislocated from other users in the site as a result of the frustrating effects encountered. This in turn led to a sense of demotivation and hindered language learning progress; it is a fairly serious concern and worthy of more research. Regarding demotivation, the site design can be improved in a number of ways (Table 3).

Table 3: Suggestions for the improvement of pedagogy: Demotivation

Issue	Pedagogic Implication	Suggestions for improvement of Pedagogy
Environmental considerations	Having variable patterns of behaviour can affect learning motivation.	Awareness needs to be raised of spending excessive amounts of time performing tasks.
Language distance	It is important to consider the distance of the languages in order to be realistic about the outcomes.	Awareness needs to be raised of the similarities and differences of the languages themselves
Extended grammar drills	Having three to four hours of grammar drills is ineffective and demotivating	Varying the content of the lesson and integrating methods will raise learner motivation levels within the environment
Commenting on too many	Commenting on submissions	Providing a daily limit on the

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| submissions | for extended periods without remuneration is demotivating | number of available submissions for learners to complete will set realistic targets. |
| Combined effect of lack of support and inability to communicate my concerns lead to a negative experience | In the lesson environment and in terms of the broader linguistic issues there is more support needed | Having people to chat with about pedagogical concerns, perhaps a chatroom, as opposed to one-on-one chats may alleviate dislocation. |

Suggestions for further research

Simply stated, we found the claim that *Livemocha* was 'addictive and effective' to be misleading. Though we see its potential, and understand that current theory in language acquisition calls for social interactions, we certainly did not feel a need to return to the site day after day. After a few days, Gruba exited; Clark hung on for one month but found the experience somewhat tiresome. This research has exposed a number of areas that could provide the stimulus for further consideration within scope of social networking online language learning.

While this study was performed on a single case, a similar study, utilising diary studies could be performed with multiple cases in which participants are each learning another language. An investigation into the themes that arise from having various perspectives would provide further scope to the results found here.

Another suggestion would be to perform a similar study with a class of participants who are learning English encouraging them to keep learner journals and submit their exercises online though the site. The submissions feature of the site is popular and charting the progress of learners using this technique to receive feedback may provide useful data in utilising social constructivist approaches.

In August 2009 the *Livemocha* site was altered slightly using content provided by *Pearson Education*. The changes made included paid content from Pearson. These lessons show a vast improvement in the integration of pedagogy with the technology, incorporating updated content that is in line with the socio-collaborative affordances of the site's design. The lessons utilise video clips of dialog, eliminating decontextualised grammar and vocabulary and focusing on more graded, practical and natural target language, such as greetings and how to introduce yourself, at lower level lessons, progressing through to advanced level language such as making and changing plans. There are many grammar and vocabulary tasks, culminating in role play practice in which the learner records their role in a dialog, replays it and then submits the role-play for comments by peers or tutors. Finally there is a test that can be taken after 5 units utilizing a variety of question formats. There are concerns with the decision to put a lot of reverb effect on the voices in the audio files but this is a small issue considering the improvements in the newer content.

Performing similar research to that of this study with the new content should reveal vast pedagogical changes to learning outcomes as a result of learning through the website. However, the changes to the site have been only been to the paid English language learning content, although there have been minor changes to the communication functions also. Charting such changes will help to better evaluate, and understand, the development of foreign language acquisition through online social technologies (Chapelle, 2007).

This research has found that in order to create an online learning environment, in which the learner is able to interact with the site and other people, there are a great many considerations to be aware of, especially before delving into the complexities of language. This research highlights the importance of design, incorporating the pedagogical needs of the learner and a detailed understanding of the language to be used for communication within a social networking site.

Despite its flaws, *Livemocha* has grown in popularity with approximately one million users daily. The site now has a strong following of dedicated learners and teachers who use it. Changes in configuration affect the expectations of the end users such as or teachers and students (Ryberg & Christiansen, 2008). Now, more than ever, technologies can quickly depreciate from being new and vital to boring and obsolete. However, this study has exposed that the underlying pedagogic design of an online learning environment is

a fundamental consideration when incorporating social networking and its inherent ecological affordances because without effective pedagogy the ecological system is limited and does not grow.

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