Learning Languages via Social Networking Sites

Billy Brick
Coventry University, UK

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.
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 
causes 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 responsibility 
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 (Fur 
man et al., 2007).

McLaughlin and Lee (2008) propose a dyna 
matic 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 cen 
tralized 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 learn 
ers’ 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 asyn 
chronous interaction, and speaking, writing, reading 
and listening activities at a time and place of learn 
ers’ 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 tech 
nology adoption in HE between 2010 and 2015:

- The abundance of online resources and re 
relationships, inviting a rethink of the educa 
tors’ role
- An increased emphasis on ubiquitous, just-
in-time, augmented, personalised and in 
formal 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 find 
ing 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 
itself best advantage, either by teachers or learners.
Related Content

Natural Language Processing as Feature Extraction Method for Building Better Predictive Models
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/natural-language-processing-as-feature-extraction-method-for-building-better-predictive-models/133878?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/natural-language-processing-as-feature-extraction-method-for-building-better-predictive-models/133878?camid=4v1a)

Building Collaborations between University Pre-Service Student-Teachers and English Language Students through a Socially Mediated Network
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/building-collaborations-between-university-pre-service-student-teachers-and-english-language-students-through-a-socially-mediated-network/108776?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/building-collaborations-between-university-pre-service-student-teachers-and-english-language-students-through-a-socially-mediated-network/108776?camid=4v1a)

Evaluation of Narrative and Expository Text Summaries Using Latent Semantic Analysis
René Venegas (2012). *Applied Natural Language Processing: Identification, Investigation and Resolution* (pp. 531-544).
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/evaluation-narrative-expository-text-summaries/61069?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/evaluation-narrative-expository-text-summaries/61069?camid=4v1a)

Learning Words from Experience: An Integrated Framework
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/learning-words-from-experience/108801?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/learning-words-from-experience/108801?camid=4v1a)