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## LEARNERS' BEHAVIOURS AND AUTONOMY IN LIVEMOCHA AND BUSUU ONLINE COMMUNITIES

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### Introduction

Current Second Language (L2) learners have many different ways to come into contact with a wide range of voice applications, social networks, video-sharing websites, podcasts, wikis and blogs, and are more and more integrating the traditional bookish way of learning a language with the Web. Among the different online applications that arose with the social web, there are the so called “language learning communities” such as *Livemocha* (Livemocha.com) and *Busuu* (www.busuu.com) These communities are designed as common social network sites like *Facebook* (www.facebook.com) with the difference that they rely on learning content and material in the target language (TL) selected. In addition, they are designed in such a way so as to put into contact learners with native speakers from all over the world in order to exchange one’s native language with the TL. At the bases of these communities there is tandem language learning, which consists in a language partnership in which each learner is an expert of his/her interlocutor’s TL. These communities are untied to formal learning institutions, they are characterized by the absence of teachers (except for the presence of tutors in the case learners pay a fee) and the activities on the communities are structured with progressive didactic units and grammar exercises carried out consciously by learners. For all these reasons, they are a clear example of how formal, non-formal and informal spheres are intermingled. These environments designed for a potential language improvement and based on social networks raise some questions about the experience learners make in these communities. This paper, deriving from a broader study (PhD dissertation) about L2 language and social networking in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* online communities, focuses on the use that online users make of its tools and on the behaviours enacted when inhabiting the communities.

### Literature review

This study, in general, is an extension and a contribution to the analysis of L2 practices using SNSs through the lens of the socio-cultural theory made by a considerable number of researchers (McCarty, 2009; Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Halvorsen, 2009) and that characterises the current research in the field. But it adds more insights to the field because it takes into account the perception of online learners who have been selected randomly in these online communities rather than in a classroom context. The literature about online communities for L2 learning can be divided into 3 main categories: descriptive studies, quantitative studies and qualitative studies.

### **Descriptive studies**

The descriptive studies mainly provide a review of the main pedagogical features of *Livemocha* and *Busuu* online communities, in relation to the Web 2.0 and to the role of the user/learner within the community (Jee & Park, 2009; Pereira & Pinto, 2010; Liaw, 2011; Loiseau, Potolia & Zourou, 2011; Potolia, Loiseau & Zourou, 2011).

### **Quantitative studies**

The quantitative studies (Stevenson & Liu, 2010; Brick, 2011; Lloyd, 2012; Chwo, Lin, Chen, Lai, Liu, Ho & Wang, 2012; Lin, 2012; Lopes & Coutinho, 2013; Liu, Evans, Horwitz, Lee, McCrory, Park & Parrish, 2013) mainly tend to insist on developing the pedagogical design of these communities according to the learners' needs. These studies in general found that these online communities provide some potential for language learning but that more research is required to improve the effectiveness of these environments under the pedagogical point of view according to specific long-term learning outcomes. The empirical research in this area leaves open questions about important aspects, such as the proportion of users who have actually completed the courses, the development and uptake of user-generated materials, and the relationship between language learning and social interactions within the community. Scholars in general, found correlations among participants' learning attitude, degree of satisfaction, visual design and functions of the website and underlined that it is necessary to explore these variables deeper.

### **Qualitative studies**

The studies in this field often combined mixed methods but are mainly qualitative. They focus on students' perceptions of online communities for L2 learning (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Lin, 2012), on affordances and constraints of the platform in relation to pedagogical issues (Clark & Gruba, 2010, Lin, 2012), on the role played by learner autonomy (Chotel & Manganot, 2011; Chotel 2012), and on the thematic analysis of learners' interactive discourse (Chotel, 2012; Gonzales, 2012). The present studies show that these communities have a potential for learning but more research should insist on the analysis of affordances and constraints with the aim to improve them under a pedagogical point of view. Previous literature, also, insisted that it would be worthwhile to focus on aspects such as learner autonomy, online interactions, and learners' usage and goals over time by means of an ethnographic method. The dissertation aimed to cover these gaps. In the context of this paper, I will shed light on learner autonomy and learners' behaviours.

### **The socio-cultural framework**

The big theoretical underpinning of this study is socio-cultural theory, according to which human mind is mediated (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) and L2 learning is socially constructed through interaction. Vygotsky (1978; Wertsch, 1985) provides the basis for socio-cultural approaches to learning with an emphasis on the social construction of learning. According to the socio-cultural theory, social contexts are crucial to understand L2 learning

and personal, interpersonal and social factors have a strong influence on access to linguistic resources, interactional opportunities and L2 learning outcomes.

### ***The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)***

An important socio-cultural notion employed for this investigation is The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In the field of language learning this is “the distance between the L2 learner’s developmental level as determined by independent language use, and the higher level of potential development as determined by how language is used in collaboration with a more capable interlocutor” (Ohta, 1995, p.96). The ZPD is basically the gap between what L2 learners can do by themselves and what they can do with assistance through collaborative interaction. Another notion related to the assistance in ZPD is “scaffolding” (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976; Rogoff & Gardner, 1984). It refers to the assistance provided to learners so that they are able to reach a higher level of performance. It is meaningful in the context of social networks because learners working together create a collaborative scaffold.

### ***Activity Theory (AT)***

The empirical work carried out is also guided by the conceptual framework of Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987). AT provided a theoretical framework and a valuable tool applicable to this study in order to gain a better understanding of the complex L2 learning practices enacted in the online communities, and in particular to understand learners’ actions taking into account each single learner in relationship and his interdependence with the social environment of the community. The adoption of AT as an underpinning framework permitted to explain the division of labour and the social roles and norms among learners while they are interacting in online communities. Finally, AT permitted to identify tensions and contradictions present in these online communities.

## **Objectives and research questions**

This paper reports some of the objectives of the broader study. The objectives for this paper are:

- To learn about the dynamics generated within online communities designed for L2 learning, to discover what types of experience learners make of these communities and, accordingly, what kinds of behaviour they enact.
- To discover about learners’ autonomy in online communities for L2 learning. In particular, to examine the way in which the participants of these environments operate and construct their actions would allow me to discuss the extent of autonomy exhibited.

The research questions are the following:

- What are learners’ primary goals in these communities? How do different uses of the online communities and different patterns of behaviour contribute to different opportunities for L2 use?

- How (if) do learners take advantage of the conditions of self-learning that the uncontrolled learning environment of the social networks offers? What are their perceptions about it? Do they consider it as an opportunity for L2 use? How do they respond to these conditions of self-learning as autonomous learners?

## **The methodology**

The methodology of this investigation relies on the interpretative paradigm, which, in line with AT and socio-cultural theory, holistically reconstructs isolated pieces of facts into a meaningful whole and which sees the world as complex, dynamic and socially constructed, interpreted and experienced by people in their interactions with each other and with the social systems (Schwandt, 1994). In fact, the analysis of the online community has taken into account the whole phenomenon as a complex system and the research focused on the complex interdependencies and dynamics developing within this system.

### ***A multiple case study ethnographic approach***

The study relies on online ethnography, which is considered as the most common approach to investigating online communities (Thomsen, Straubhaar & Bolyard, 1998). Through online ethnography I have studied the culture of the communities selected, the norms and rules determining learners' behaviour, their shared values and beliefs, their practices and their understanding of surrounding environment also when relating to others.

### ***The methodology and its phases***

A wide range of qualitative methods has been adopted, from the online survey and the semi-structured interviews to the collection of samples of interactive discourse occurring in online social networks. In this way, the methodological triangulation, that is, the use of different methods to corroborate each other, allowed the cross-checking of the data collected, improving further internal validity. The methodology adopted is funnel-shaped and it consists of 4 phases, as Figure 1 shows:

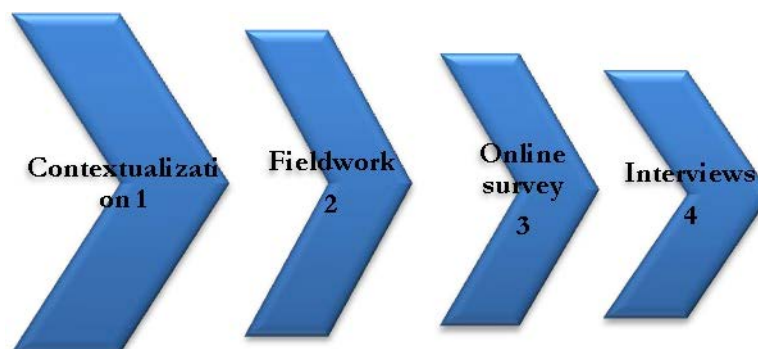


Figure 6. The 4 methodological phases of the investigation

Each phase opens up the way to the following phase and redirects to a deeper and deeper understanding of the behaviours enacted by informal learners in these communities, of the modalities in which peer assistance among them occurs, and of the different types of assistance they provide to each other.

- 1<sup>st</sup> phase: *Contextualization*. Review of the existing landscape of online communities for language learning and selection of *Busuu* and *Livemocha* communities as settings for the investigation.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> phase: *Fieldwork*. Immersion in the activities of the communities under analysis as a learner and observation of learners' behaviours.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> phase: *Online survey*. The objective of this phase is to identify trends, patterns of behaviours and main practices among language learners in the online communities.
- 4<sup>th</sup> phase: *Interviews*. This phase elicited learners' more detailed accounts of their experience and of their language use and learning in the communities through semi-structured interviews.

## **Results**

Analysing the data, I identified different profiles of learners and different learning behaviours to which correspond different uses of the platform, a different level of engagement and attitude and different types of opportunities for L2 use. I distinguished among three broad categories of learners' profiles. To the i) first category belong those learners who make a wide use of the didactic tools, to the ii) second those who decided to opt for the social networking features of the community. These learners in part prefer the interactions in the online chat because these suit their personal learning style and in part because of the behaviourist and repetitive didactic tools of these platforms; to the iii) third those who combine the use of didactic tools with the social networking features of the community. Learners belonging to profiles 2 and 3 proved to be those who have more opportunities of exposure to the TL since they interacted in the chat.

The results also showed that learners are aware of the uncontrolled environment of social networks but they do not perceive it as "uncontrolled", since the self-paced lessons and the organization of the learning material tends to resemble the type of learning occurring in formal environments. It also emerged that many among them do not usually expect from the platforms more than they can actually offer. Therefore, they seem to respond to this condition by managing their own learning in such a way to use the platforms as a support and as a training tool. At the same time, many of them recognised that the platforms represent a valuable opportunity to practise the language with native speakers, which in a formal course is not always a common practice.

In addition, learners demonstrated to be highly aware of the limitations regarding the learning content of the platforms. According to learners' perceptions, it is in the area of content delivery and organization that the community needs meaningful development. Learners appreciate the self-paced lessons, the opportunity to learn at one's own rhythm and the

possibility to retrieve easily past lessons. Nevertheless, the repetition of the same typology of exercise is one of the main factors determining learners' abandonment of the platforms. One of the emerging themes is learners' management of their learning process within and outside of the community. Learners evaluate as very important the opportunity of learning more languages without any cost of money and time, since some of them underscored not to have money and time to attend face-to-face courses. Students in general seemed to recognise up to what level they could take advantage of the community's affordances and to have reflected on its limitations and constraints. In this sense, they took responsibility of their own learning and orientated their learning towards a more strategic learning.

Learners mainly demonstrated to recognize, be aware and appreciate the social networking aspect related to the platforms. However, some learners mentioned that they would like the platforms better organized visually and more user-friendly. To this regard, a student suggested adopting "more Facebook-like features" when looking for a language partner: About the social networking features, students' comments stressed the importance of belonging to the same community of learners and highlighted that they benefited the most when talking to native speakers of the target language.

To conclude, results revealed that those learners who showed a more autonomous attitude and were already lifelong learners when they joined the communities tended to have a more effective learning experience, to find interesting topics for discussion with their peers and to be able to combine social and pedagogical trajectories even if not adequately supported by a teacher.

### Conclusion

Analysing *Livemocha* and *Busuu* online communities under the lens of AT, it was possible to identify *tensions* and *contradictions* within the activity system. These *contradictions* mainly concern its *tools*, the didactic materials and the social chat. The didactic materials consist of structural exercises belonging to the audio-lingual structural approach and they seem to be "in tension" and not to work in synergy with the idea of online community itself and with the social and communicative tools represented by the online chat.

In addition, given that these communities are inhabited by the three aforementioned categories of users, the actions of each subject in the communities are shaped by different motives and object. Therefore, when learners belonging to category 1 (who make an extensive use of the didactic units) come into contact with learners belonging to category 2 (who make an extensive use of the social networking features of the platform through the chat tool), their goals and motives are incompatibles and tensions emerge. In other words, learners adopt different behaviours because they are driven by different goals and the community, with its tools that do not work in synergy towards a common goal, contributes to emphasize these tensions.

This study makes a contribution to the achievement of a better understanding of the dynamics occurring in online communities and it added more insight to lifelong learning processes and on the current reflections on formal and informal learning contexts. It also provided some insights for teachers, tutors and practitioners but also for lifelong online L2 learners interested in integrating these learning practices with more traditional forms of learning. A limitation of this study concerns the presence of the researcher, who might have inevitably influenced the interviewees during the data collection process.

Future research should insist with the idea of “bridging activities” (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008) between the communication occurring in out-of-class informal settings and the learning activities taking place in the formal context of the language classroom. To this regard, it would be useful, for instance, to apply AT to tele-collaboration initiatives on *Livemocha* and *Busuu* occurring in formal contexts. To conclude, another possible direction for further research would be about technical and usability issues in relation to these sites in order to determine which design features are most suitable and helpful to language learners.

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