

Paradoxes of Social Networking in a Structured Web 2.0 Language Learning Community

Mathieu Loiseau^{a*} and Katerina Zourou^b

a. LIDILEM, Université Stendhal, Université Pierre-Mendès-France, Grenoble, France

b. Université du Luxembourg, FLSHASE/LCMI/DICA-lab, Walfer, Luxembourg

Abstract. This paper critically inquires into social networking as a set of mechanisms and associated practices developed in a structured Web 2.0 language learning community. This type of community can be roughly described as learning spaces featuring (more or less) structured language learning resources displaying at least some notions of language learning methodology. Taking Livemocha as an example, and especially the Culture space, social networking will be analyzed in terms of the extent to which it is used and taken up by language learners by means of social networking technologies comparable to those of a Social Networking Site (SNS). In addition, we critically examine the role of social networking architectures in sustaining peer language learning in highly networked spaces. We argue that social networking, both as a conceptual framework and as a technical incarnation, can be put in the service of collective activity and instrumented in a way that leads to effective language learning, beyond merely being a trendy or fun component of an SNS-like community.

Keywords: social networking, network effects, language learning, SNS, language interaction.

1. Social networking in language learning activities: context of research

The global socio-technical context sets the social Web as a point of interest of the CALL community. Various publications have analyzed the potential of Web 2.0 networked spaces in language learning activity. The study presented here builds on previous works in this direction. In [Dixhoorn, van, Loiseau, Mangenot, Potolia, and Zourou \(2010\)](#), we outlined a typology of Web 2.0 language learning communities that allowed us to broadly break them down into three types:

* Contact author: mathieu.loiseau@u-grenoble3.fr

- Language exchange sites, where users meet for language socializing purposes, without the help of learning material;
- Marketplaces, which allow users to hire language tutors and buy individual activities;
- Structured Web 2.0 language learning communities, which provide free (and possibly paid) distance language learning courses on a dedicated platform.

We focused on this last type in terms of the global approach to language learning in the context of these communities (Loiseau, Potolia, & Zourou, 2011) and then in terms of the quality of the language material and methodologies used on the platform (Potolia, Loiseau, & Zourou, 2011). Since structured Web 2.0 language learning communities are by definition spaces where networked collective activity happens in a self-motivated manner, they constitute exemplary spaces suitable for analysis of social networking and its implications for language education. The scope of our research is to provide elements contributing to conceptual and technical improvements with a view to facilitating peer language learning through social networking mechanisms and processes. Here we focus specifically on whether or not interaction in a highly social networking space can be instrumental for language learning.

2. Object of the analysis

We build our argument on an analysis of a specific section of Livemocha, possibly the most salient structured Web 2.0 language learning community, claiming 12 million registered users and resources for 38 languages. In February 2011, Livemocha designers launched a new section, aimed at allowing users to “discover what life is like around the world [and to] explore other members’ cultural photos and stories or share [their] own with the community”^{*}.

The section consists of discussion threads initiated by a user posting a picture associated with a short description or a story. Other users are invited to provide feedback by pressing a “like” button or commenting on the thread. In order to browse through the various threads users are offered two types of filter: countries – only the threads containing the selected country are displayed either by date or by popularity, and contribution – the user can access the threads they started, liked or commented on, sorted by date of the user’s contribution.

Our study is twofold: we discuss the section as an artifact in terms of the possibilities offered to the user and as a host to the user’s practices. These elements are presented (1) in comparison with mainstream SNS, including in terms of feature adoption by users, as a prerequisite to its effective use, and (2) with a language learning focus.

* <http://www.livemocha.com/explore>

3. Data collection and first results

To perform this analysis, we have used the fact that the threads are actually numbered, their url identifier being their actual rank in the chronology of the section, to select them randomly. Data collection took place around one year after the launch of the section, in February 2012 (more than 385,000 thread IDs). The rough dating principles at work in Livemocha made the distribution in time difficult but allowed us to establish that the timeline is broken down into 28-day periods.

We used both aspects to show that an average of approximately 16% of identifiers lead to broken links ($N = 248$) and to estimate that whereas during the first three periods an average of at least 1,235 threads per day were posted, during the three periods ending on June 28, 2012, at most 580 threads were posted daily*.

Considering the data available, this decrease cannot be attributed to any element in particular, especially since the intent behind the section is fuzzy and could concern the constitution of reusable resources as well as providing a space for interaction.

4. Analysis of the artifact

4.1. Data management mechanisms

Our study of the filtering and sorting mechanisms at hand compared with the mass of available data revealed that except in certain cases (the least represented countries), the data management infrastructure does not appear to allow access to older threads. A hypothesis which is consistent with the data, as at least 89% of the threads ($N = 105$) received comments spanning over less than one period (four weeks). Even though our indicator cannot be compared strictly with mainstream SNS available data, the use of the section is much more compliant with SNS type interactions than with the constitution of a pool of reusable resources for language learning.

This similarity prompted us to examine the functionalities by comparison with those available in mainstream SNS, including conditions for adoption. [Burke, Marlow, and Lento \(2009\)](#) provide factors influencing the adoption of new features in SNS. According to their study, newcomers tend to share more content if their contacts do so.

4.2. Social organization of data and notifications

We compared the use that is made of the social network of friends in mainstream SNS and the Livemocha culture section, which showed that while in SNS the network of friends, groups and interests act as a filter on the global amount of data. In the culture section, no such filter is available. The contributions of a user's network of friends are only available as such through each user's individual profile.

* 95% confidence interval.

Additionally, the onsite notifications of friends' activity shunt anything that happens in the culture section. On the other hand, offsite notifications (emails) include comments made on the user's threads, but have a different function, which does not favour interaction, considering the instantaneous nature of the activity. Interactions are also likely to be hindered by the lack of use of AJAX (Asynchronous JavaScript and XML) in the section.

5. Engagement with the culture section

Again, the data is consistent with the observations, as engagement with threads seems low (20% of threads without feedback, 90th percentile of the distribution of comments at 3 comments per thread). On a more qualitative basis, unanswered questions and lack of attention to previous comments are observed, even in threads displaying multiple comments; a fact that is underlined by a low number of explicit exchanges between users (47% of threads with comments, 15% of total threads, show at least one explicit exchange).

Engagement within the threads also seems lacking, as most comments constitute appreciative comments. Assessing linguistic complexity by counting words in comments shows that 62% of the comments are composed of 5 words or less.

These two observations are likely to be linked, as a correlation can be found between the mean length of comments in a thread and the length of the longest discussion in it. Moreover there is a significant difference between the number of words in comments, depending on whether they are part of an explicit exchange.

Despite showing a lack of engagement with and within the threads, the data underlines the well-founded nature of the use of social networking site features to trigger linguistic exchange, as social and linguistic engagement seem linked.

On a qualitative basis, our data contains some, though not many, examples of different types of activity likely to favor language learning:

- Rephrasing of the same idea in different ways by the same speaker;
- A learner reusing vocabulary used in a previous comment;
- Metalinguistic feedback;
- Explicit cultural explanation or debate.

It is worth noting that these examples essentially only occur in explicit exchanges between users.

6. Conclusion

This study is exploratory in the sense that more variables need to be taken into account, as well as the point of views of users and designers. All the same, it shows potential in the course chosen by Livemocha in its culture section. However, the community

designers do not yet seem to have found an effective way to “harness collective intelligence through network effects” (Musser, O’Reilly, & the O’Reilly Radar Team, 2007, p. 101) towards language learning activity. The still numerous user contributions are nonetheless steadily decreasing in numbers. The social section displays lackluster functionalities, especially when it comes to social features.

We feel that two leads are worth exploring in respect of using these social features for language learning: improving the functionalities of the tools to enhance the possibilities of action left to users, and giving more guidance to learners’ activities (possibly in a subset of the social networking tools).

These leads are not mutually exclusive as the first might provide the means for interactions to create didactically relevant activities. The second can provide users with more numerous use schemes to reuse and adapt when using the tools in an unconstrained context.

Acknowledgements. As part of the activities of the European network “Language learning and social media: 6 key dialogues” <http://www.elearningeuropa.info/languagelearning>, this article engages only its authors. We thank our project colleagues, the pole-emploi and the European Commission for their support.

References

- Burke, M., Marlow, C., & Lento, T. (2009). Feed me: motivating newcomer contribution in social network site. *Proceedings of the 27th international conference on Human factors in computing system* (pp. 945-954). Boston, MA. Retrieved from <http://www.thoughtcrumbs.com/publications/paper0778-burke.pdf>
- Dixhoorn, van, L., Loiseau, M., Mangenot, F., Potolia, A., & Zourou, K. (2010). *Language learning: resources and networks*. Language learning and social media. Retrieved from http://www.elearningeuropa.info/files/LS6/language_learning_resources_and_networks_DEF.pdf
- Loiseau, M., Potolia, A., & Zourou, K. (2011). Communautés web 2.0 d’apprenants de langue avec parcours d’apprentissage : rôles, pédagogie et rapports au contenu. *Actes de la conférence EIAH 2011* (pp. 111-123). Retrieved from <http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00598762>
- Musser, J., O’Reilly, T., & the O’Reilly Radar Team. (2007). *Web 2.0 Principles and Best Practices*. Sebastopol, California: O’Reilly.
- Potolia, A., Loiseau, M., & Zourou, K. (2011). Quelle(s) pédagogie(s) voi(en)t le jour dans les (grandes) communautés Web 2.0 d’apprenants de langue ?. *Actes de la conférence EPAL 2011* (pp. 19-22). Retrieved from http://w3.u-grenoble3.fr/epal/dossier/06_act/pdf/epal2011-potolia-et-al.pdf



Published by Research-publishing.net
Dublin, Ireland; Voillans, France
info@research-publishing.net

© 2012 by Research-publishing.net
Research-publishing.net is a not-for-profit association

CALL: Using, Learning, Knowing
EUROCALL Conference, Gothenburg, Sweden
22-25 August 2012, Proceedings
Edited by Linda Bradley and Sylvie Thouésny

The moral right of the authors has been asserted

All articles in this book are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License. You are free to share, copy, distribute and transmit the work under the following conditions:

- Attribution: You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the publisher.
- Noncommercial: You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- No Derivative Works: You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

Research-publishing.net has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate. Moreover, Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before (except in the form of an abstract or as part of a published lecture, or thesis), or that it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the authors, the editors, nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions that may be made. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design: © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)
Aquarelle reproduced with kind permission from the illustrator: © Sylvi Vigmo (sylvi.vigmo@ped.gu.se)
Fonts used are licensed under a SIL Open Font License

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-03-2 (paperback)
Print on demand (lulu.com)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2012.