REVIEW OF *LIVEMOCHA*

Title	Livemocha
Platform	Windows 7, Vista, or XP; Mac OSX 10.4+; Java
Minimum hardware requirements	128 MB RAM (256 MB recommended) Internet access at 56k or above Soundcard w/microphone and speakers
Software requirements	Updated Java
Developer	Shirish Nadkarni; supported by Pearson and Collins
Price	Unlimited use for basic functions in 35 languages; scaled fees for fully developed courses in five languages (English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish)
Publication Year	2007

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Livemocha's founder, Shirish Nadkarni, had the idea of a social networking site (SNS) for learning languages while on a trip to Spain with his children (Schmidt, 2009). He watched as his teenage children, after years of studying Spanish in formal settings, were not able to engage in basic conversations with native speakers and would instead log on to social network sites upon returning to the hotel room. Against this backdrop, the concept of taking advantage of online social networks to facilitate practical language learning was born. In Livemocha's language exchange model, learners are linked voluntarily with native speakers of their target language via Web 2.0 technologies. The platform encourages users to interact and speak with one another in order to practice language skills, while fostering an environment of sharing and reciprocation. Livemocha intends to make language learning more accessible and effective, especially for people who cannot afford classroom instruction or to immerse themselves in a foreign country through extended stays or travel.

Livemocha prides itself on being one of the most advanced systems in terms of social learning and the largest online learning site in the world. The number of registered Livemocha users is growing very rapidly. In February 2009, it had an estimated 350,000 users from over 200 countries (Harigunami, 2008). In 2010, its members have exceeded 6 million and it offers the learning of over 35 languages online (http://www.livemocha.com/learn-english). Despite its popularity, very few reviews or studies have been conducted to look into if or how the system is living up to its ambition. This review, in addition to introducing its general features, critically delves into its usability, learning materials, and functionality of assisting language learning[1] to provide language educators and learners with helpful information to understand the strengths and weakness of the system and ways to take advantage of its affordances.

EVALUATION

Usability

To register as a Livemocha member only takes a few steps and has various pricing options, starting at a free membership for learning 35 different languages as well as the option to take more fully developed courses for a fee in five languages (English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish). The user-friendly Web site itself is in 11 languages (English, simplified Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Turkey, Polish, and Russian). The layout and design of the Web site are straightforward so navigating the Web site and accessing its various functions is easy. Livemocha also has a virtual keyboard, aligned with the language being learned, that pops up when the user is working on writing exercises. This is especially useful for people learning a language that their own computer keyboards do not support. However, the virtual keyboard is currently only available in a few languages

(e.g., French, Italian, German, etc.).

Users simply log on to the Web site (http://www.livemocha.com) to sign up. An email message will then be sent to the user to activate the account. There are four sections in Livemocha: My Profile, Learn and Practice, Help Others, and Store. The profile uses the learners' native language and preferred target language to suggest partners as friends for the user to invite to chat and share exercise submissions. The Learn and Practice section is the area in which the user enrolls in her/his selected courses and works on exercises. The free membership level allows the user to take basic through intermediate level courses with learning, reviewing, writing, and speaking exercises. Learn and review exercises are automatically and immediately graded. Speaking and writing exercises can be submitted and reviewed by native speakers for comments to improve. Learning progress is visually presented so the user can monitor advancement. A reward system, called Mochapoints, is used to track users' activities. By working on course work and submitting speaking and writing exercises, users earn Mochapoints. When Mochapoints are accumulated to a certain amount, medals will then be awarded. Audio, PDF, and video downloads of the course material are also available for users to study offline.

Learning materials

In terms of the content of learning materials and activities, those of the paid courses and free ones are vastly different. The learning materials of the free courses, for example, are organized into units. In each unit, learners have multiple exposures to target vocabulary and sentence structures, as well as to listening and reading input. Exercises start with matching words or phrases to images, and dragging and dropping words or phrases to form sentences. The game-like matching and drag-and-drop exercises require no overt output and should be less stressful for learners to complete. However, these exercises require memorization more than comprehension. After several tries, even without real understanding of the language, learners can easily get high scores. In terms of the content, these activities focus on grammar with little or no context provided for the language. No real communication skills are involved in the learning tasks or exercises in these lessons; even the speaking exercises involve only recitation of provided phrases or sentences.

Another point worth noting is the duplication of the organizational structure across the different languages that are available for free. Irrespective of the language chosen, the learning units have the same topics, grammar points, vocabulary, exercises, and even graphs and photos. Such a one-size-fits-all approach does not consider specific demands or structures of particular languages (for example, whether or how to change the forms of singular nouns to plural nouns), so learners might feel at a loss when trying to make sense of the language being learned.

The materials of the paid courses however, differ considerably. In the paid courses, arrangement of the course content basically follows the principles of the functional-notional syllabus (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983). The global concept of language is broken down into units of analysis in terms of communicative situations in which they are used and in the effort of fostering the development of learners' communicative competence in real-life contexts. In each unit, the introduction of new language is highly contextualized, and a range of exercises are provided. The language is presented with a video clip in which various dialogues are carried out among characters. Users have the chance to hear and see the target vocabulary or sentence structures being used in situational, communicative contexts. A transcript of the dialogue is available in both the language being studied and the native language of the user in a pop-up window with the click of a button. After viewing, users answer multiple-choice questions to check their comprehension of the dialogue. Explanations of grammar points are provided before form-focused practices. Users are even given chances to create their own video conversations and submit them for expert reviews.

It is obvious the learning materials in the paid courses are much livelier and the language more authentic than the free ones. More diverse tasks are provided for users to engage in the learning of the different language skills. The study of the four language skills is better balanced and integrated in exercises and quizzes as well. Having access to feedback from expert reviewers is an advantage over having volunteer but untrained native speakers comment on them. Although with its current content, some find it not worth paying for (e.g., Gallen, 2008), and some have concerns about the tension between "formal" aspects of language learning *(*e.g., grammar practice and vocabulary learning) and the "informal" social networking model, overall the social networking aspect of the system has earned praises (Jee & Park, 2009; Stevens & Shield, 2007/2009).

Functionality of assisting language learning

As its name suggests, Livemocha intends to create a relaxing Web-based environment similar to that of a coffee shop where its members interact and support one another in language-learning (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). Social-networking sites (SNSs) are becoming increasingly popular, particularly with the younger generation (Forlano, 2009). SNSs are usually built to allow people to express themselves and to interact socially with others. Self-expression and social interaction are some of the most important contexts for language acquisition (McBride, 2009). Researchers have also pointed out that the sense of "flow" often causes some users of SNSs to become fully engaged in an activity and lose track of time (Egbert, 2005; Tufekci, 2008). Thus, if pedagogically sound language learning experiences can be integrated into SNS activity design, then language learners can be similarly involved in these activities, resulting in higher motivation and interest in learning new languages. Furthermore, once students gain skills in communicating and connecting with others through SNSs in the target language, they can establish relationships with other speakers of the target language and form a supportive online learning community (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Tu & Corry, 2002). Also, as indicated in the final report of the study regarding the impact of information and communications technology (ICT) and new media on language learning in EU countries, the use of technologies offers flexibility and autonomy, as well as opportunities for self-improvement in studies/work (Stevens & Shield, 2007/2009). SNSs hold the potential to foster independent, autonomous language learning. With all the aforementioned benefits of social networking considered, utilizing the affordance of SNSs for language learning seems to be a logical step to take.

How Livemocha is exploiting its social networking functionality for language learning deserves a close look. First, in terms of self-expression and social interaction, Livemocha does allows various forms of interactions within the community such as giving and receiving feedback for speaking and writing submissions from native speakers and Livemocha experts, sending and accepting invitations to form partner groups, and interacting with other community members via asynchronous and synchronous modes. This "show[ing] appreciation by helping other members learning their native language" is seemingly an "innovative but instinctively human way to learn a new language" (Schmidt, 2009). However, a study examining the uses of Livemocha by a group of students in Japan in 2007 revealed that most of the users deliberately used pseudonyms instead of real names and inputted false information about themselves including countries of origin and native languages; at the end of the project, the intimate social bonds as described in the research literature were unfounded (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). Although the findings of this case may not be generalizable to all uses of Livemocha and the semester-long investigation might have been too short to draw definite conclusions, the findings do reveal that in order to fulfill the ideal of creating a supportive online learning community, Livemocha would need to have a more sophisticated impression management system that allows users to set levels of exposures to others and that puts its members at ease about self-disclosure.

According to Egbert (2005), CALL activities that are intrinsically rewarding can cause people to push themselves to higher levels of performance. Social contact is a powerful intrinsic motivator and combining contribution with social contacts with other contributors can cause members to contribute more (Kraut & Resnik, 2008). Livemocha leverages the native language expertise of its members by allowing them to make contributions to the content of courses. Performance feedback from other community members who are native speakers of the target language is also a motivator (Forlano, 2009). In addition to receiving feedback for submissions, Livemocha sends weekly progress reports to keep users informed of their status or score. The score system which leads to a publicly-displayed reward system of Mochapoints can enhance motivation and performance. Although the points do not account for tangible rewards, having medals does warrant the member a degree of prestige among the Livemocha community and thus also creates an external reward.

Interacting with native speakers of the target language is not without its downsides. First, users should not assume that all native speakers are capable of providing helpful feedback. Although Livemocha provides guidelines for giving reviews, there is no way to prevent receiving sloppy or inadequate feedback (Lewis, 2010). There is also a possibility that the reward system actually encourages quick review for earning more points faster. Another problem is that receiving feedback in the target language from native speakers would not be helpful if the learner's target language proficiency is far too basic to understand the comments.

Summary

Livemocha, with its carefully designed learning materials and integration of Web 2.0 technologies into learning activities, creates an interactive, authentic, and meaningful language learning environment that many traditional language instruction contexts can not provide. Despite some of the specific concerns discussed in relation to Livemocha, the social networking aspect of the system undoubtedly plays a key role in making the learning interesting and attractive to its users worldwide. In fact, Livemocha is only one of a growing number of SNSs available for language learning (e.g., Babble, Busuu, VoxSwap, XLingo, Yabla, Ning, etc.). However, while Livemocha and other related SNSs and applications are quickly emerging, empirical research in this area is scarce, leaving open questions about many aspects, such as the proportion of users who have actually completed courses, the length of time required for an online language learning community to mature, the development and uptake of user-generated materials, and the relationship between language learning and cultural learning in an online SNS context. In short, although SNSs like Livemocha seem promising, much is yet to be learned about the dynamics being generated within the online learning community and how such experiences might lead toward or detract from satisfactory, efficient, useful, or culturally sensitive language learning experiences.

NOTE

1. These three are the most relevant to this review of the five evaluation criteria of English learning websites developed by Liu, Liu, and Hwang (2011).

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