ความน่าจะเป็นในการเรียนรู้ภาษาผ่านเว็บเครือข่ายสังคมออนไลน์: กรณีศึกษาเว็บ Busuu

ดร.ศรินยา ขัติยะ¹
พชรากรานต์ อินทะนาค²

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้จัดทำขึ้นเพื่ศึกษาการใช้งานของเครือข่ายสังคม Busuu โดยใช้วิธีวิจัย
วิจัยตนเองแบบมีส่วนร่วม (cooperative autoethnography) ในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษแบบเชิงรุกด้วยตนเอง ผู้วิจัยได้จดบันทึกประสบการณ์จากการเรียนและนำข้อมูลมาแบ่งปัน พูดคุยกับกลุ่มนักเรียนทีม การวิเคราะห์ผลจะเน้นสิ่งประเด็นหลัก ได้แก่ ขีดความสามารถในการเรียนภาษา (language learning potential) ความเหมาะสมกับผู้เรียน (learner fit) การเน้นความหมาย (meaning focus) และผลกระทบทางด้านบวก (positive impact) ผลของการวิจัยพบว่าในการเรียนภาษาผ่านเครือข่ายสังคม Busuu สามารถเพิ่มขีดความสามารถของผู้เรียนได้แต่ยังมีข้อจำกัดบางประการ ซึ่งผลต่างๆ ได้ยืนยันถึงประสิทธิภาพของการเรียนภาษาผ่านชุมชนนักปฏิบัติ (community of practice)

คำสำคัญ: เครือข่ายสังคม การเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ การปฏิสัมพันธ์ ชุมชนนักปฏิบัติ

¹ อาจารย์ประจำภาควิชาภาษาอังกฤษ คณะมนุษยศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่
² อาจารย์ประจำภาควิชาภาษาอังกฤษ คณะมนุษยศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่
Potentiality of Social Network Sites for Language Learning: A Case Study of Busuu

Sarinya Khattiya, PhD.³
Phatcharakran Intanaga⁴

Abstract
This paper investigated the social network site, Busuu, for its potentiality. Adopting cooperative autoethnography, the researchers participated in the site as active learners learning English. Learner diaries were used to record learning experiences and were shared with other members in the research team for discussion. The qualitative analysis emphasized four main issues: language learning potential, meaning focus, learner fit and positive impact. The results revealed the potentiality of language learning through social network sites with some limitations. These confirmed the effectiveness of learning English through the community of practice.

Keywords: Social Network Site (SNS), English as a foreign language, Interaction, Community of practice

³ Lecturer, English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University
⁴ Lecturer, English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University
Introduction

The concept of Web 2.0 has been widely discussed and analyzed in the field of technology and education. One of the authors of the term, Tim O’Reilly (2005), defines it as a collaborative environment in which users have an opportunity to contribute to a growing knowledge base, assist in the development of web-based tools, and participate in online communities.

A group of Web-based applications designed using Web 2.0 technology (blogs, wikis, podcasting, multimedia sharing sites, and social network sites) is centered around developing online communities based on greater degrees of interactivity, inclusion, collaboration, authentic materials and digital literacy skills (Haythornthwaite & Kazmer, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Thomas, 2009).

One feature of Web 2.0 which has gained massive popularity to date is social network sites (SNSs) with 2.22 billion users worldwide (Statista, 2016). SNSs are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

Generally, SNSs are used for non-educational social interaction. Some popular examples of these sites include Twitter (http://www.twitter.com), Facebook (http://www.facebook.com), and Google+ (https://plus.google.com). Participating in these SNSs, users can create their online profiles and socialize with other users or friends within their circle of networks and develop online communities of shared interests.

With its interactive features, there is a growing interest in how and whether Web 2.0 technology could be used for educational purposes (Stevenson & Liu, 2010). A recent trend in the realm of online language learning community has been the increasing of language learning social
network websites, where members share their expertise in the languages they know with the community, and use the resources of the community to learn new languages. Ryberg and Christiansen (2008) state that SNSs have potentiality for peer-to-peer learning; but the use of SNSs for foreign language learning has not been sufficiently researched. As Lomicka and Lord (2009) argue research investigating second language acquisition through the use of Web 2.0 tools is only beginning to emerge, and the research is lacking both from theoretical and empirical perspectives.

Therefore, this research investigated the potentiality of Busuu, a social network site for languages learning, for English learning by emphasizing four criteria: 1) language learning potential which motivates scrutiny of various factors such as the involvement quality of the learners, the exploitation of the chosen input acquisition, and the quality of the practice learners receive, 2) meaning focus which prompts researchers to examine the extent to which learners have rich, interesting input that provides an opportunity to comprehend and/or produce meaning, 3) learner fit which refers to the level of the language, which is particularly critical to the cognitive and psycholinguistic theories, and 4) positive impacts which refers to the benefits—not necessarily linguistic—that learners might derive from working on the tasks. In the present article we first provide a theoretical background to our study, followed by the description of the SNS analyzed. The data collection procedures as well as results of our analysis are then presented.

**Review of Literature**

**Social Network Sites and Language Learning**

To date it is apparent that social as well as academic communication is mediated by participation in Web 2.0 and other digital environments such
as social network sites, blog networks, instant messaging, gaming, and voice and text messaging over cell phones (Thorne & Black, 2008; Thorne, 2008). The substantial increase in participation in mediated communication environments suggests that for many individuals, performing linguistically structured identities in second and foreign languages now involves digital mediation as often as, or more often than, non-digital forms of communication (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008).

Based on sociocultural theory, Vygotsky (1978) believes that learning results from social interaction rather than through isolated individual effort, and that engagement with others is a critical factor in the process. Based on this view, SNSs are increasingly attracting the attention of language instructors and researchers due to their potentiality. These sites are varied in the features that they offer. Some serve as a repository for lessons for various languages that members can contribute to, some provide a means for teachers to register themselves so as to enable interested learners to contact them, while some serve as a platform for people learning various languages to interact and assist each other.

Some examples of SNSs designed for language learning include Livemocha (http://www.livemocha.com), Italki (http://www.italki.com), Lingq (http://www.lingq.com), Palabea (http://www.palabea.net), and Busuu (http://www.busuu.com). Users can learn new languages through socialization within online communities. This presents new opportunities for developing diverse online learning environments and enhancing interactivity, participation and feedback between students, their peer groups and teachers (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). Language learning that takes places in these social networks can be based on the creation and sharing of user profiles, friends, instant messaging, blogging and comments. One of the most intriguing features of
these sites is the opportunity for users to interact directly with native speakers through the use of video, audio, or text based chat.

This type of network-based language learning involves the use of computers connected to one another in either local or global networks. Its main focus is on human-to-human communication. Language learners with access to the Internet, for example, can now potentially communicate with native speakers or other language learners all over the world twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, from school, home or work. That learners can communicate either on a one-to-one or many-to-many basis in local-area network conferences further multiplies their opportunities for communicative practice (Kern & Warchauer, 2003).

The primary goal of users joining language learning SNSs is to make new social connections for the specific aim of learning a new language. Carroll (2008) notes that a social network with Web 2.0 technology has the potential to be used for structured language learning purposes. SNS systems and the personal learning environments associated with them, present language educators with an opportunity to examine existing theories of learning, and to gain invaluable data and insights into how learning is occurring in the new age of digital literacies and the deconstruction of traditional classrooms that it necessitates (Lockard & Pegrum, 2007).

**The Interactionist Theory**

This research was grounded within the Interactionist Theory. The study of conversational interaction involving second language (L2) learners and their interlocutors has been central to SLA research since the early 1980s. The interactionist theory proposes that learners can learn best through interaction because it allows them to receive comprehensible input and produce output (Long, 1996). Moreover, the interaction process may trigger
learners’ awareness of input, help learners to notice the target input features, and finally prompt learners to modify their linguistic structures (Long, 1996) for more comprehensible and appropriate output (Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994).

The production of “pushed” output (Swain, 1995, 2005) in interaction process can foster language acquisition as it helps learners notice holes in their L2 knowledge, which may lead them to notice the gap between what they are able to produce and what is available in the input (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). Output production also allows learners to test their hypotheses against target language norms and leads them to reflect on their own and their interlocutors’ output and increase their metalinguistic awareness (Swain, 2005).

With regard to face-to-face interaction, Ellis (1999) identified two types of interaction: intraperson (within the person’s mind), and interperson (between people). However, Chapelle (2003) argues that interaction also takes place in electronic contexts. Hence, the third type of interaction which is interaction between person and computer or learner-computer interaction should be included. As Cummins and Sayers (1995) point out, interaction through the World Wide Web, electronic journals and newsletters, electronic discussion groups, newsgroups, and bulletin boards takes learners far beyond the one-to-one interactions of earlier days.

Therefore, input, interaction, and the creation of output in authentic contexts have become major components of activities in a second or foreign language context (Kim & Rissel, 2008). To provide learners more opportunities to be exposed to such aforementioned components, computers are integrated into language learning with an assumption to create an environment for promoting interaction and negotiation of meaning among
learners, and to provide access to authentic outside sources (Kim & Rissel, 2008; Warschauer, 1996).

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has been widely used in a second language (L2) learning context as a logical outcome of interactionist research as language learning has extended to virtual environments for theoretical and pedagogical reasons. Lai and Zhao (2006) drew on interactionist SLA theory to examine the relationship between linguistic mistakes and text-based synchronous discussion. They reported that interaction through CMC increases the rate at which students notice their own linguistic mistakes and generates explicit forms of negotiation of meaning.

Murphy (2010) examined learner interaction in an electronic learning environment through online reading activities which involved two types of feedback: computer-mediated Elaborative feedback and Knowledge of Correct Response (KRC) feedback. Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) was integrated into the reading activity with computer-mediated Elaborative feedback as means for interaction between learners in remote locations. It was found that computer-mediated Elaborative feedback was effective in promoting reading comprehension and the qualitative analysis of interaction suggests that CMC is a suitable way of generating quality interaction between learners.

The role of interaction has long been central to the study of language acquisition theory. The precise role of interaction in actual development and internalization of L2 knowledge has continued to challenge researchers (Fang, 2010). Notwithstanding an interactionist approach being a regular part of face-to-face learning environments, it is difficult to implement such a methodology with isolated learners without the use of technology (Murphy, 2010).
SNSs Analytical Framework

With the evolving of Web 2.0 technologies, the number of SNSs, especially sites related to online learning, has developed so quickly; however, the research in this field is still in its infancy. To date, no specific analytical framework has been proposed to systematically evaluate SNSs potentiality for language learning. A small amount of research has been carried out so far making use of various analytical frameworks based on different theories. For example, Ryberg and Christiansen (2008) examine potentiality of the Danish SNS Mingler.dk for peer-to-peer learning and development. Their research is grounded in the concepts of ZOP (zone of proximal development) and COP (communities of practice) together with the horizontal and vertical relations and movements.

Holding a different viewpoint, Harrison and Thomas, (2009) utilize the analytical framework proposed by Boyd and Ellison, (2008). With the primary focus on SNS management and network, their ethnographic research came up with 5 themes including impression management and identity; friendship management and social interaction/ bonding; network structure; mediation; and SNS metaphors, and bridging online and real life. András Kétyi (2014) pays more attention to pedagogical issues and provides a thorough evaluation of Busuu as an online language learning community. He evaluates Busuu in terms of technical features, activities (procedures), teacher fit (approach) and suggests that learners benefit from Busuu in many different ways despite the limitations that can hinder the learning process.

Using auto-ethnographic approach, Koko (2013) aims at examining the potentiality of Busuu as a foreign language learning site. Three themes emerge after conducting thematic analysis. The first theme is motivation which is promoted by some useful features of the site. The second theme is
frustration due to the lesson content, level of interaction and others. The last theme discussed is demotivation from time constraints and other factors.

Based on a review of literature, most of the SNS researchers lay their focus on the role of the community for language learning. To examine the potentiality of SNSs for language learning, attention should be drawn to both suggested lessons provided and support from the learner community. Chapelle (2009) states that if technology-based materials and tasks are to be evaluated in terms of the opportunities they provide learners for SLA, frameworks and guidelines are needed for conducting such evaluation. One of the existing frameworks that can be applied to SNS analysis is the CALL Task Appropriateness Evaluation proposed by Chapelle (2001, 2009).

The framework defines six characteristics of CALL materials. The first is language learning potential, which motivates examination of factors such as the quality of the interactions learners engage in, the utility of the selected input for acquisition of particular areas, and the quality of the practice learners receive. The second is meaning focus, which prompts researchers to examine the extent to which learners have rich, interesting input that provides an opportunity to comprehend and/or produce meaning. The third is learner fit, which refers to the level of the language, which is particularly critical to the cognitive and psycholinguistic theories. Authenticity is the fourth; a claim about authenticity requires demonstration about the linguistic match between the language that learners see in the instructional tasks and language that they will engage with beyond the classroom. This aspect can be examined through a systemic linguistic analysis. Positive impact refers to the benefits—not necessarily linguistic—that learners might derive from working on the tasks. The last characteristic is Practicality—the degree to which learners have access to and skills needed for work on the tasks—brings in the real-world factors that greatly influence success. In this study “authenticity” and
“practicality” will not be discussed. The criterion “authenticity” relates to the meaningful concepts of language demonstration and the learning engagement of the learners. It, thus, overlaps with the notion of “meaning focus” in this study. In addition, authenticity is manifested extensively from learning directly with the native speaker in the Busuu community. As for “practicality”, this research is done merely from the perspectives of the language instructors. Therefore, the degree to which researchers have access to and skills needed for tasks does not reflect the real-world factors that influence the learner’s accomplishment.

**Description of Busuu**

Founded in 2008, Busuu is a social network site for learning languages with currently 60 million users worldwide at the time of writing this article (2016). It combines immersive language learning with Web 2.0 platform which offers online language exercises, exams and testing including grading and correction. Different levels of fluency are available for the user to choose from such as upper intermediate, elementary and beginner. Special lessons (i.e. travel courses and business courses) are offered for the intermediate and advance learners. Native speakers offer live conversation to experience, hear and see the language lesson first hand.

Busuu offers free instruction in 12 languages at the beginning and intermediate levels. To begin learning via Busuu, learners have to register and choose a language and level of study. In this case, English is chosen to be studied. Each level is composed of a different numbers of lessons ranging from 12 –21 lessons. Level tests are available for learners to evaluate their learning progress. The lessons are categorized into themes in which a specific range of vocabulary and expressions are presented. Learners will learn an individual word, followed by an example of its use in context with a caption
and a native speaker pronouncing the caption. Learners can save the new vocabulary or phrases they want to learn into “Save to My Vocabulary”. Learners will also be exposed to sample sentences using the target vocabulary and listen to native speakers pronouncing them. After learning a few words or phrases, learners will move onto a review exercise to check their understanding. In the second part, the learners will employ the same target vocabulary to generate some new sentences by listening to the dialogue and completing the transcript. In the intermediate level and beyond, the learners are challenged by listening to a short monologue or dialogue and answering the questions. In the speaking exercises that require interaction with the native speakers, the learners have to record their pronunciation by recording their voice and submit it to native speakers for feedbacks. In the writing exercises, the learners will learn key grammatical concepts and assess their comprehension in writing activities. In the “Practice” section, the learners will practice their English skills by watching short video news clips that are changed weekly and answer the questions. Furthermore, they can opt to compose a concise paragraph to depict the picture they see. Their outputs are then reviewed by a group of native speakers in Busuu community. The site also has a tracking system to keep a record of the student’s progress. Text and voice chat systems are also provided for communication with other learners or native speakers.

Methodology

In the previous section, literature related to the study and the previous relevant studies were reviewed and discussed. In this section, the research approach, participants, and research methods are presented.
Autoethnography as Research Method

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that utilizes data about self and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010). In the field of Applied Linguistics, this method was undertaken by some well-known scholars (e.g., Schmidt & Frota, 1986, Etherington, 2004). As a research method, autoethnography takes a systematic approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation about self and social phenomena involving self (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010). Even though the use of self as the only data source in autoethnography has been questioned (Anderson, 2006; Holt, 2003), access to sensitive issues and inner-most thoughts makes this research method a powerful and unique tool for individual and social understanding (Ellis, 2009).

Participants

Based on autoethnographic method, all the participants in this research were a team of researchers learning English through the SNS, Busuu, and recorded their own reflections as data. The research team included 2 EFL instructors from a university in Thailand. Both of them have taught students at all levels using both in-class and face-to-face teaching and online learning via web-based tools. Specifically, Khattiya has extensive experiences as an electronic learning designer for almost a decade. She was also a pedagogical designer of an award-winning online role-playing game called Eternal World. The researchers registered to learn English, one of the languages available at Busuu for two months from September to October 2015.

Methods

This research was grounded within a qualitative paradigm. The research method used was cooperative autoethnography adopting a full
concurrent collaboration model in which we collaboratively collected data, conducted analysis, and wrote a report. Working as experienced language instructors and e-learning designers, we set out to investigate the potentiality of SNSs on foreign language learning. Following the collaborative autoethnography model proposed by Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang (2010), we initially reviewed relevant literature and decided on the general direction of the research as well as topics to explore. We, then, began learning the chosen languages in Busuu and individually recorded our experiences. We selected the “Intermediate B1” level as it matches the level of the undergraduate students in the university. After completing the first 2 lessons, we shared our writings with each other, reviewed them, and posed probing questions to each other for further exploration.

We also discussed problems confronted and decided on the solutions before moving onto the next step. In the subsequent data collection stage, we continued learning Lesson 3 in Busuu. The Intermediate B1 level consists of 14 lessons. The time spent on each lesson varied from 30 minutes to 1 hour. To set our identity in the social network site, we began by joining a learner’s community and socializing with other users who were learning the same languages. Like in the preliminary step, each of us collected data and wrote out each person’s experiences and reflections before sharing them with the other member for revision and further analysis. In the third phrase, data analysis and interpretation, we synthesized our writings for thematic analysis based on Chapelle’s (2001, 2009) CALL evaluation framework which is discussed earlier.

Results and Discussion

In this section, the potential and shortcomings of Busuu based on the aforementioned four criteria are discussed as follows.
1) **Language learning potential**

Language learning potential is considered to be the most important part in CALL evaluation. According to Chapelle (2001) language learning potential refers to the extent to which the activity can be considered to be a language learning activity rather than simply an opportunity for language use. Criteria that address language learning potential emphasize the degree of opportunity for a beneficial focus on form (Chapelle, 2001). Focus on form as discussed in the research on instructed SLA can be prompted through instructional activities which (1) draw learners’ attention to specific aspects of the linguistic input, (2) engage learners in interactions requiring their negotiation and co-construction of meaning, and (3) prompt learners to produce comprehensible output (Jamieson, Chapelle & Preiss, 2004). We, therefore, examined the language learning potential in Busuu focusing on two criteria namely enhanced input and interaction.

*Enhanced input*

Schmidt (1995) states that in order to learn any aspect of the L2 (from sounds, to words, to grammar, to pragmatics), learners need to notice the relevant material in the linguistic data afforded by the environment. The more L2 learners notice, the more they learn (Schmidt, 1995). Linguistic input can be made salient by highlighting particular forms in the input or repeating the target forms throughout the material (Jamieson et al., 2004). Some techniques are proposed to draw the learners’ attention to forms such as making salience, modification, and elaboration. However, the main method used in the “Lesson” section in Busuu is the audio-lingual method which lays the emphasis on learning L2 through repetition and imitation. In each lesson, the learners read and listen to a number of words, phrases and sentences. As depicted in Figure 1, no grammatical feature is made salient to the learners.
They have to navigate through the lesson and notice the repetitive use of form. Sentence structure and other grammatical features are learned inductively by analyzing various sentences and generating one’s own rules. This kind of input is inadequate for the learners, especially the beginners, to process and produce their output. Without comprehensible input, learning a new language might become demotivated.

Interaction

Based on Interaction Hypothesis, Long (1990) proposes that interaction is necessary for second language acquisition. Interaction benefits learners by providing opportunities for negotiation of meaning and drawing attention to form (Ortega, 2009). Interaction in Busuu also lies in sociocultural theory which advocates that human cognitive development is highly
associated with the social context; learning takes place not exclusively on the individual level but significantly involves social interaction with others, preferably with more capable ones (Vygotsky, 1978).

Interaction in Busuu can be categorized into 2 main forms. At the beginning of each lesson, interaction between learners and computer is more common. To complete review activities, the learners interact with the computer by clicking interactive icons, matching images with sentences and rearranging scrambled sentences. However, the interaction in all review sections is in a one-way direction. In some sections, the feedback is prompted by the computer. However, in most of the review parts, no computer feedback is observed. Although the learners choose wrong answers, the exercise keeps on going and finally sums up the correct percentage at the end. This causes frustration to the learners as they could not figure out which item is incorrect and for what reasons.

The second form of interaction which is a dominant feature in Busuu is the interaction between learners and other learners. In writing and speaking exercises, learners produce an output, and submit it to receive feedback from other anonymous users or their invited friends. Receiving feedback on the specific content helps to heighten learners’ attention for noticing not only errors in their language use but also linguistic features to be learned that have not been noticed (Schmidt, 1995). However, in Busuu, it is not guaranteed that learners benefit from regular feedback on their work because some native speakers just give a compliment (e.g., Good job., Keep on trying.) without helping to correct the learners’ work or providing constructive suggestions. In addition, the feedback is quite inconsistent. Khattiya posted a question about her writing before submitting it to the native speaker who helped answer her question. Interestingly, there was no feedback for a week. This can be quite frustrating to learners who are highly motivated.
2) Learner fit

In CALL, the difficulty of materials relative to learners’ needs is important and it is therefore one aspect of learner fit (Chapelle, 2001). The lessons presented should have appropriate difficulty as well as an appropriate instructional strategy relative to individual differences. With regard to the learner fit characteristic of Busuu, we focused on learner differences and instructional strategies used in delivering lessons.

Learner differences have been shown to relate to achievement in second and foreign language learning (Gardner, 2008). Garrett (1991) argues that individualization of CALL materials should provide alternative approaches or presentations for students and sophisticated programs should eventually allow students to choose from a variety of approaches. Hence, CALL designers need to be able to theorize the role of various types of input for learning because they have the option of selecting, sequencing and modifying input. Various techniques have been implemented in response to this belief. One technique found in Busuu is providing a wide variety languages to be learned. As stated earlier, Busuu offers lessons in 12 languages. Learners can choose languages of their interest and enroll in courses appropriate to their proficiency level. Lessons provided in each language course range from beginner to upper intermediate levels. If the learners are exposed to those languages for the first time, they can start with Beginner A1 which starts from simple vocabulary, phrases and sentences. They can also choose more difficult stages if they have some background knowledge in those languages. Furthermore, the learners can also make choices in accordance to their topic preferences such as directions, shopping, travel, etc.
3) Meaning focus

The significance of meaning focus as a criterion in CALL evaluation lies on its connection to form focus. Therefore, through the completion of meaning-focused tasks, form focus is also emphasized. According to Chapelle (2001), meaning focus denotes that the learner’s primary attention is directed toward the meaning of the language that is required to accomplish the task. In Busuu, the learners’ attention is drawn to the meaning of the target language through different means.

One of the ways that helps the learners infer the meaning of the target language is the use of images. In the Lessons section, the learners start off by drawing connections between the pictures they see and the captions that are attached to them. Thus, this technique assists the learners to construct and interpret the meaning of the language. In an attempt to enhance the meaning, the Lessons section is followed by review exercises, where the learners are required to complete different tasks that can exhibit their understanding of the language meaning. In the review exercises, learners are asked to match the images with the written or spoken words, phrases, or sentences that the learners had been exposed to in the Lessons section. Therefore, learning is enhanced when the meaning is associated with the particular images.

Featured tips is also an advantageous technique that is used in Busuu. This feature is of great help especially for the learners with no exposure to the target language. Basically, Featured tips is intended to provide the explanation of the text below each picture. In spite of the fact that the targeted words, phrases and sentences are not marked individually with their own translation, that doesn’t hinder the learners from inferring the meaning of each word. Thus, Busuu provides the learners with tools and functions that make the new language more meaningful.
Figure 2 exemplifies the Featured tip in Busuu which is very helpful to the learners when they encounter the new words or expressions and need more explanation. This is very crucial because it allows learners to interpret the meaning of the language as it appears and let them know how they can use it.

![Figure 2: An example of the Featured tip explaining a difficult English expression](image)

However, *Featured tips* are sometimes inaccessible or elusive. Only a limited number of the lessons are embedded with the Featured tips. This can be considered inadequate to promote learners’ focus on meaning when they encounter unfamiliar words or phrases. Occasionally, the explanations provided are equivocal leading to confusion among learners.

Meaning focus, as Chapelle stated, can occur during tasks involving reading and writing when learners use the written language purposefully for
constructing and interpreting meaning. Therefore, the Write and Speak exercises in Busuu aim also for directing the learners’ attention toward the meaning of the target language. In the Write exercise, the learners are required to use what they learned and previewed in the previous parts. When producing the target language in a written or spoken form, knowing the meaning of that language plays a crucial role. In Busuu, the corrective feedback that learners receive from native speakers can also direct the learners’ attention to the meaning of the language.

An effective function in Busuu is the Chat option with native speakers. A Chat window is available in the “Practice” section. It is activated when the learners click on Chat with user. What seems to support language learning are the two features embedded in the Chat window, which are a list of useful phrases and the Busuu dictionary. The list of useful phrases displayed in the Busuutalk chat window will give the learners’ ideas for new words and sentences and guide them on how to use those phrases while the Busuu dictionary will facilitate the learners with translation. The learners can save their conversation, print it out and review the vocabulary at the end of their chat sessions.

As a way of emphasizing the importance of interaction between language learners and native speakers, Busuutalk assists learners, beginners in particular, to use the target language effectively with the aid of this tool and also facilitate comprehension of input. Moreover, the Busuu dictionary feature is another way of checking the meaning of the language in case of communication breakdowns. In addition, the chat offers an opportunity for the learners to engage in some form of negotiation of meaning. According to Long (1996) comprehensible input gained through interactional adjustments such as negotiating meaning and modifying output is central to second language acquisition. In fact, negotiation is one of a range of conversational
processes that facilitate SLA as learners work to understand and express meaning in the L2.

4) Positive impact

*Learner Autonomy*

The concept of learner autonomy has been one of the crucial fundamentals of Busuu design. According to Holec (1981), learner autonomy is “the ability to take charge of one’s learning.” To be able to achieve the goal of autonomous learning, certain conditions relating to the learner need to be obtained (Thanasoulas, 2000): cognitive and metacognitive strategies, motivation, attitudes, and knowledge about language learning.

Cognitive strategies, as defined by O’Mally and Chamot (1990), “operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning.” Busuu has reinforced the learners’ cognitive strategies to some extent. The learners have ample time to manage the input in many ways. Firstly, through the drilling and repetition in the Lessons section, the learners have the opportunity to notice the form and the correct pronunciation. Though the form is not explicitly explained, the repetition and substitution of the key words together with the visual aids and translation button (on the lower left corner) help to strengthen the learners’ cognitive strategies leading to their basic understanding of form. However, there are times that the learners need to rely heavily on their guessing strategy.

For instance, the learners were exposed to the form of the phrases “Let’s” and “Let me” through the repetition of key language presentation. Progressing through the lesson, learners would be able to identify that “Let’s” is a wrong choice since it would make the sentence ungrammatical. This assumption would have been easily confirmed if there had been more
input. In this stage, the input is very limited on those terms, so the learners need to cling on vague assumption.

![Figure 3: An example of a lesson stimulating Cognitive strategy](image)

Cook (1993) viewed metacognitive strategies as skills about learning rather than learning strategies themselves; in other words, they are skills used to plan, monitor, and evaluate the learning activity. Busuu does help to promote the mentioned skills. Learners are able to take responsibility to manage the time accordingly to their own paces, and pay attention on particular points presented in the lesson. They can make their own choices, firstly, in terms of targeted language and later on in a specific focus in the lesson. The program is designed so that the learners can skip some parts and move on to the next items; they can also try different units and topics suitable to their needs, proficiency and interests. Moreover, learners can
monitor their progress, and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses to be working on.

Learners using Busuu could be assumed to be highly motivated with a positive attitude towards language learning since they have made their own choices to learn. The lessons are divided into several achievable stages to motivate the learners. We personally found that the interaction among the learners and the native speakers does play a crucial role in developing (de)motivation. Busuu is designed around the concept of a learner-friendly environment which according to Candy (1991) should be collaboration rather than competition with low threat. The feedback from members in the community is mostly positive and encouraging; however, whether the feedback is constructive is still questionable. There are many attempts to motivate learners to continue with their study and to reverse their role to be a teacher. As a learner, one will earn “Busuu-berries, stars and badges” awarded by making progress with his/her own language learning goals. Then, the earned points can be uploaded to various social network services such as facebook and twitter. Learners will get Busuu-berries each time they do a learning unit or correct a writing exercise for other learners. Moreover, learners can also send their Busuu-berries to other friends in order to motivate them. In addition, learners will receive special Busuu-badges to reward specific activities such as correcting a lot of posts, having finished a course or having a lot of friends. This helps boosting learners’ motivation to keep on doing their study as they can share and compare their progress with their friends on other tools/sites. Besides this, learners are encouraged to take on the role of teacher of their native language to give advice and feedback to other members in the community by reviewing the submissions from the members. Learners will earn a teacher score which they will be able to redeem for free online lessons. Taking on the role of a teacher to provide feedback to others
is also a way to reflect on their own learning by being able to compare and contrast their native language with the targeted one they are learning. The Busuu-berries can be accumulated and converted to “stars” or even a “diamond” which will help put the learner into the ranks of the Busuu Community to determine how ‘valuable’ the learner is for the community. The strategy does prompt the learners’ connection and interaction among the members, and also strengthen learners’ motivation to be active in the language community. However, those who are able to take the role of teachers and earn the score need to be the native speakers of the particular languages offered as lessons on the site. Therefore, some learners whose mother tongue languages are not in the list will be unwillingly excluded.

In general, through the promotion of learners’ cognitive and metacognitive strategies using various tasks and flexible time management, and the incentives to promote learners’ motivation by the provision of Busuu-berries, Busuu has enhanced the process of learner autonomy and stimulated learners to take responsibility of their own learning. However, there are some limitations in the language presenting sections themselves that might lead the learners to incorrect assumptions as mentioned earlier. Therefore, to follow the certain path of learning autonomy, learners also need guidelines or ‘helping hands’ to lead them. The well-structured lessons definitely support the learners; the reflections from the native speakers (or teachers) also assist the process.

Community of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) first used the term “community of practice” (CoP), which can be defined as a process of social learning occurring when people sharing a common interest collaborate over an extended period of time. By sharing ideas and strategies, determining solutions, and building
innovations, the members in the community assist each other in facilitating and spreading knowledge and tacit knowledge within the group. CoP is distinctive from other communities like Communities of Interest in terms of expertise requirement and active practitioners as shown in three main structural characteristics of CoP: domain, community and practice.

In the aspect of domain, the members of Busuu clearly share the same domain of interest: learning a language. They actively use the tasks presented to fortify the bond in the community. The interaction between the members is the strong component of CoP. Tasks in Busuu persuade the members to participate in sharing opinions as evident in the feedback section where the native speakers can share their (tacit) knowledge with the other members of community who in turns are the experts of other languages. Sharing interest cannot maintain a CoP, but the members of the CoP should make contribution to create the repertoire of resources. Busuu encourages the members to assist with the construction of such a repertoire by asking them to help with writing and tips for learning the languages. Busuu has a good impact in fostering the community of practice among the various language learners. The support from other members reinforces better understanding and clarifies the unclear points.

Limitations

Regardless of the technical constraints mentioned earlier, this study is done from the perspectives of the language instructors only. The outcomes or the results from the application did not reflect authenticity of the learning cycle. It is, therefore, better if this software application is implemented by an actual L2 learner so as to yield an accurate reflection of the application.
Conclusion

Results from the analysis showed a certain degree of potentiality for language learning through SNSs. Busuu offers wide range of choices that fit learners’ needs. It makes use of SNS features (text and video chatting, web-authoring tools) to capture the learners’ interest. The dominant feature attracting millions of learners is an opportunity to interact with native speakers synchronously and asynchronously. The learners can practice the target language through different means of communication. In addition to being learners, they can also share their expertise in the languages they master. Taking active roles in Busuu benefits the learners and community as a whole. On the other hand, some pedagogical issues should be addressed. Since Busuu employs the audio-lingual methods to deliver its lessons, learners learn new languages through listening and mimicking strategies. Inadequate input leads the learners to come up with rules which are not applicable all the time. Regardless of the limitations, Busuu can serve as an alternative for learners who want to learn new languages and socialize with friends all over the world who share the same interests.
References


