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Reality Checks with Two Commercialized Language Learning Communities: Livemocha and Lang-8

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Introduction

Projecting the rapid growth of online language learning community in recent years, more and more people have made use of the self-learning websites to embark on their language learning. However, most of research in the field was conducted quantitatively with the general questions on the questionnaire to investigate the issue on the surface that barely include the actual experience to probe further. Thus, we choose two language learning online platforms, *Livemocha* and *Lang-8* and carry out a qualitative research based on our one-month learning log to determine the efficacyof the two websites.

Both websites are established in 2007. Nevertheless, *Livemocha* enjoys a wider recognition and discussion than *Lang-8*no matter in researchers or in language learners. We are curious about this phenomenon and we consider *Lang-8* is not with that much deficiency. Consequently, we are motivated to exemplify the two websites in a more moderate way and, most importantly, offer suggestions for websites designers from a user and learner's standpoint. The main theoretical framework adopted for this study is the ecological linguistic perspective that values the affordance that users receive in the overall environment.

Research question

In this paper, we make attempts to compare and contrast the two websites, *Livemocha* and *Lang-8*, from van Lier (2004)'s ecological perspective to see how and to what extent the users in the two websites could experience ecological language learning environment.

Literature review

Vygotsky argued that humans use symbolic artifacts to establish an indirect or mediated relationship between ourselves and the world (Lantolf, 2000). AsLantolf suggested, "mediated" is the most fundamental concept of sociocultural theory(SCT) (Lantolf, 2000). Mediation can be the aid of teachers, the interaction between peers, or the invisible cultivation and interaction between the society and humans. In recent

years, the well development of the Internet and social network sites (SNSs) had a great influence on language learning and how people interact with each other. Mediation now not only happens in classrooms or in person but also occurs on the Internet.Research also suggested that SMSs are an 'obvious possibility to consider' in terms of finding computer-assisted language learning activities with which students are familiar." (McBride, 2009, p.38).

As time marches on, website designers discover the prominent trend of mediation on the Internet in language learning. In response to this trend, online learning websites or platforms like *Livemocha* and *Lang-8* claim that their websites, in combination with the features of SNSs are helpful to language learning. They encourage language learners to participate in this trend of "learning through the online community". With the rising Social Networking Sites (SNSs) that provide the platform for language learners to exchange languages with native and other speakers of their target languages, SNSs have paved the way to encourage the authentic and meaningful language use in L2 online communication when the intercultural encounter has occurred (Elwyn, 2012). Research and studies, in response to this tread, examined the possibility and potential features that enable these websites to become tools for language teaching and learning. For example, Adrienne Gonzalez (2013) examined the rapport management and online learning in*Livemocha* on the basis of humorous performance since rapport management is regarded as a tool for the creation of "group solidarity, group identity, and individual identity". In addition, since *Livemocha* is a self-motivated learning environment, it is in the best interest of every participant to care for his or her network of language partners. She mentioned that *Livemocha* is based on a reward system for those participants who successfully navigate the social aspect of the community and that "*Livemocha* is a perfect microcosm for the real world." Elwyn (2012) proposed that the introduction of SNSs has reinforced language learners' willingness to communicate in theonline language learning community of *Livemocha*. *Livemocha* not only offers learners the opportunities to practice the linguistic knowledge in terms of four skills but also brings the cultural components in language through the interaction based on feedback-giving or text-based chat with language partners all over the world. Users' activeness and autonomy are highly emphasized by helping others to grade their exercises and submitting their own exercises at the same time. The reaction from the language partner is like a stimulus for the further interaction like the text-based chat. The comments, corrections, and feedback from others can be the major factors to determine the willingness to communicate since the access to all the feedback and submissions are available for users anytime they log in *Livemocha*. In this way, the threads of asynchronous communication are established. In the online language learning community like*Livemocha,* Elwyn argued that the reciprocal communication offers the authenticity and convenience to determine users' motivation to communicate with others actively.

On the other hand, *Lang-8*, also receives attentions from researchers like Young and Judith. Young (2013) proposed that communication in *Lang-8* is authentic because journal writing is substantively engaging. Learners write what interests them for the sake of sharing, not for practicing. Judith also made a detailed evaluation, proposing both the advantages and disadvantages of it (Judith, 2011).She maintained that the kind of language learning community like *Lang-8* could be a stepping-stone for language learners to initiate their learning. With non-educational purposes in the

blogging community, learners are learning in the non-threatening environment by freely interacting with others in target language. Regardless of their levels, every user is accepted to be the valued member of the community for the further reciprocal feedback. In *Lang-8*, every user is a teacher and a learner at the same time. While practicing one's language skills by making mistakes and receiving feedback, one has the forum to go through others' writings in his native language. Furthermore, learners' privacy is guaranteed since they are able to decide whom to share their blogs with. However, *Lang-8* is not without defaults. Considering the designation of *Lang-8*, learners may manage to come up with some topics that can echo others' experiences. As a result, advanced learners or those with specific interests may be demotivated to continue their language learning in *Lang-8*. Also, learners' purposes of learning may conflict with each other in the way that learners may fail to get the satisfying responses as they expect. They seem to benefit mainly from their own production of writing, rather than the feedback from others.

The Internet expands the context of mediation and raises research issues in TESOL. At the same time,van Lier (2004)brought the idea of mediation close to the work of psychologists (Warschauer, 2006). In contrast to the orthodox view of mind-processing, van Lier argued for the need to consider new research and teaching methodologies which are appropriate for dealing with ecosystems (Lier, 2004). In van Lier's terms, "a further aspect of an ecological approach is the notion of affordance, which is dynamically related to mediation or tool/sign use." Such ecological perspective of mediation helps us understand how new technologies transform the primary forms of human activity when applying to computer-assisted language learning (CALL) (Warschauer, 2006).

For the content validity of this study, some may question the differences between Sociocultural Theory(SCT) and ecology perspective as an analytical approach. van Lier (2004) also proposed that SCT and ecology perspectives share many featuresin common. Yet, an ecological perspective or worldview can add significant directions and theoretical cohesion to SCT work. He further explained that ecology perspective has the following features:

1. A consistent theory of language within a theory of semiotics, clarifying the notion of sign, and emphasizing the dialogical nature of meaning.
2. A view of context that includes the physical, the social, and the symbolic world.
3. A focus on affordance as including both immediate and mediated action, perception and interpretation.
4. A temporal and spatial interpretation of situated activity.
5. A concern with the quality of learning environments, and a criticalperspective on educational activity.
6. An appreciation of variation and diversity.
7. The integration of self and identity in the learning process.   (van Lier, 2004 p.21)

These features are valued in this study since our materials and research questions are highly context and experience oriented.In addition, research findings suggest that an ecological perspective can provide a powerful analytical framework for understanding technology uses in schools. Ecological perspective points out new directions for research and has significant policy and practical implications for implementing innovations in language learning(Zhao, Y., & Frank, K. A. 2003).

Although the thriving of SNSs and online learning platforms has raised the awareness of many scholars to conduct the related studies in the field, most of them are conducted through survey or questionnaire. Few examine the authentic experience through detailed daily records with ecological perspective. Therefore, to fill the gap in the research literature, we manage to understand how learnersexplore in *Lang-8* and *Livemocha*, to see how online learning platforms operate as an ecological system, and to see how these experiences help users with their language learning.

An overview of the two self-access online learning websites

Lang-8 is an online diary-writing platform that generally resembles the ordinary blogging service. Users post their diaries in their target language while other native speakers are encouraged to revise those diaries with their native language. Users themselves can also correct others' diaries with their knowledge of their native language.There are no "coins" in *Lang-8* but users earn L points when they post diaries, revise diaries or vote for the best correction. The more L points one earns, the more exposure he or she obtains. However, L point cannot be used to purchase anything and no one knows the ideology of how the L system actually calculates user's "points". It only represents the rank that one locates in *Lang-8*.

Livemocha has been widely argued as a well-designed website to learn language. *Livemocha* is a relatively comprehensive language-learning environment that consists of a rewarding system called "mocha coins". Free users can earn "mocha coins" by rating other's practices, such as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary exercises. With "mocha coins", free users can buy courses that are provided by publishers of language teaching materials. According to the site, it has approximately 12 million registered members from 196 countries around the globe, which is the largest self-access learning websiteup-to-date.

Methodology

Sherry used to major in English Language and Literature. Chris was an English minor. We both graduated from National Chengchi University and both major in TESOL MA program in graduate school. As for language proficiency, both of us have passed GEPT high-intermediate level and we reach the same language proficiency scale in TOEIC test with almost the same score. Until now, both of us have learned English for more than ten years. In terms of our computer skills, we master Microsoft office and we enjoy socializing with friends on social networks, such as Facebook. We make lots of friends online and know well about online communication. To carry out a qualitative research, we work on the one-month learning log respectively as qualitative data on *Livemocha* and *Lang-8* continuously, and which focuses on the process and the interaction with other users in the online community. Chris writes diaries in English on *Lang-8* while Sherry learns Japanese on *Livemocha*.

Chris's Exploration with *Lang-8*

I used to write blogs on *Lang-8* three years ago when I was in my junior year. My major was not English but English has been always my best subject. I also applied English as my minor in my junior year. I am familiar with online self-access websites or software because this is one of the ways I maintain my adaption for English. Once, my friend happened to introduce this online writing website to me. Since I just decided to study graduate schools at that time, English writing ability is very important to me. No matter it is false or not, my first expectation and impression of *Lang-8* is that it was able to improve my writing efficiently. However, this previous experience was a little bit frustrating because my writing was not that good before. Unlike my friends, I did not receive any responses in the beginning. After revising several days, I finally got some corrections. Sadly, I made many mistakes in one single entry every time. I felt embarrassed to have native speakers review my diaries. Although I did improve and learn some techniques of writing but meanwhile, I felt that I spent too much time on writing one single diary and that what I learned was too trivial to organize. It was less efficient than I had expected so I stopped using it a month later.

Now I am a graduate student in TESOL MA program and my writing is a lot better than before. I feel more confident to share my daily life on *Lang-8*. I make grammatical mistakes sometimes but that does not affect the overall fluency of the composition.

Nov. 1 The first time I logged in *Lang-8* for this study, I updated my personal profile and pictures to attract more people. I searched diaries that were written in Chinese to earn more L points. This was a whole new "experience" to me because I did not upload or reveal any personal information two years ago.

Nov. 8 After using *Lang-8* for a week, I found that the updated profile did attract people. Some sent me friend requests. Others reviewed the correction or voted for the best correction. There were also some social alphalizers who sent me requests just for fun. However, still not every entry received correction. To earn more exposure, I tried to revise others' diaries; especially the oneshave not been revised for a long time, which offered double L points. Somehow, it is really hard to find a Chinese-written diary, which has not been revised. I do not know it is because there are few Chinese learners or because I did not work hard enough. But I am sure that I feel less motivated to revise when a diary has been well-corrected. Sometimes I only voted for the best correction which seems less effective to earn L points.

Another possibility was that there are social alphalizers that deprive most of the resources in *Lang-8*. In *Lang-8,* users are ranked according to their L points. I found that there was a far distance between the first place and the second place. Even though the resources were an invisible property that shared by every user on *Lang-8*, Chinese native speakers, new comers, and free users share much lesser resources than premium users and social alphalizers. I also found that after my resignation three years ago, no more than 20 new Chinese users joined*Lang-8*afterwards. Although this seemednot to affect the interaction between English native speakers and Chinese native speakers, this phenomenon indicates that this website does not appeal to

Chinese native speakers.

Nov. 15 After I realized that it was almost impossible for me to be and regarded as an active person like other users, I felt less motivated to revise people's diary. Even though I still post diaries every two or three days, I seldom felt satisfied in that learning experience. It became more like a daily routine than an exciting learning activity because no one interacts with me. As time goes by, I seldom made grammar mistakes in my writing. I learned to check twice and avoid grammar usage that I was not sure. Since I became less active on *Lang-8*, sometimes I did not receive any comments.

As for the design of the website and the overall using experience, the interface is user-friendly and straightforward. The home page is clear and instinct-oriented. Every button directs to the exact and expected pages and that the buttons are usefully functioning. Even though sometimes website page speed is so slow that makes me impatient, it does not affect the generally clear and fluent overall packages and experience.

In conclusion, I think the motivation for me to keep the diary on *Lang-8* mainly relies on the sense of achievement, sense of interaction, and confidence. If the website cannot offer stable affordance for me to maintain the three factors, I am likely to abandon learning.

Sherry's Exploration with the World of *Livemocha*

As an EFL learner, at the age of six, I started to learn English at a cram school. I was totally fascinated by the accent of the native speakers. Since then, the environment had cultivated my interest in the field of English learning and made me become an active and autonomous learner. Whenever I studied English, I felt as if I was in the paradise. When it comes to my learning experience, I have never used self-access learning websites to learn languages before. In my opinion, I felt those websites were not motivating and effective for me to be skillful in the languages I wanted to learn.

In the past, I have not heard of *Livemocha*. I happened to know *Livemocha* from an assigned reading in one of my MA courses. As the scholar Gonzalez (2013) in the reading proposed, *Livemocha* could be the "perfect microcosm of the real world" (p.213) for language learners. In order to fulfill my curiosity, I began to make some research about *Livemocha*. As the commitment of *Livemocha* suggests on its official website, it aims to "creat[e] a world in which every human being is fluent in multiple languages". Thus, my interest toward *Livemocha*was evoked.I would like to personally confirm whether it is so wonderful as most of studies promoted. I then especially anticipated the positive outcome that could offer me after one-month exploration in it.

Nov. 3 As I entered *Livemocha*on the first day, it was such a total new and exciting experience for me. Everything appeared to be too fascinating to catch my attention. The background of *Livemocha* was brown and it made me feel as if I was wandering in the coffee shop, approaching whoever I would like to interact with freely while sipping my favorite mocha. Unlike some other websites, the procedures to sign up a

new account was quite simple by filling out some basic information and choosing the native language (Chinese-Mandarin) and the target language (English) that I would like to learn. Next, what came to me first was the colorful icons that function as profile image with sound effect popped up to give me a refreshing sensation as a novice user in the world of *Livemocha*. Users were asked to choose the levels of the target language, from the level of a completely new learner to the level of a proficient language learner who was able to express one's concepts and ideas. The design was friendly by employing the vivid images to illustrate the different levels of language so that the learners might not feel stressful. As an EFL learner who have learned English more than ten years, I chose the level of a proficient language learner.

The interface was clear with only few items so that learners did not need to bother to be familiar with the functions before engaging in their language learning. Fundamentally, my concept of *Livemocha* was to build up one's linguistic knowledge through interacting with others actively. It was more like a reciprocal learning that the first thing to do was to help others with the native language that one was good at. In this way, learners had the access to buy courses with the rewarded coins. Surprisingly, I found that the preset system had given me too many coins (40999 coins) as a beginner who had done nothing so far to deserve all of these. Before helping others, I had the right to choose the learners, the type of activities, and the levels of the language that I had the interest to help. Since I was confident in my ability in Mandarin Chinese, I decided to select the level 9, which was the most advanced one in the scale. Unfortunately, *Livemocha* did not provide the lessons for Mandarin Chinese learners from L2 to L9. As a consequence, I had no choice but to help L1 learner. Once again, I was shocked to find that there was only one learner in L1 so far. (According to my classmate, David, he told me it is a matter of users' time of logging in). The person's native language was Korean. The way I helped the Korean learner in Chinese was merely by rating his pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar without giving some constructive feedback and advices. I rated for like two times on his speaking and writing skills and my coins increased by 1887 coins. As a rater and learner at the same time, I might be spoiled by the generous system. I would not be diligent to contribute my efforts in offering conducive suggestions to the peers. All in all, my first time in *Livemocha* turned out to be a confusing and frustrating experience. It seemed like the small number of learners in *Livemocha* might demotivate me to a certain extent as well. Two concerns then surfaced in my mind subsequently. I was wondering whether few Chinese learners had made use of the website as a tool to improve their ability in Mandarin Chinese as it contradicted the fame and benefits of *Livemocha*. Does *Livemocha* provide the sufficient platform for learners to practice and improve since some levels of lessons are yet to release and the grading criteria is quite general and obscure?

Nov. 5 Inspired from one of my classmates, David, who had used *Livemocha* to learn Arabic, I made up my mind to change my target language from English to Japanese so as to make my language learning experience more interesting. I typed a brief introduction to illustrate my motivation for learning Japanese so that other learners who clicked on my profile could see it, in hope for attracting users from all over the world. I started to use mocha coins I earned to buy some Japanese courses. However, as a L1 Japanese learner, I was confused by the course titles. How could the system presuppose a total new beginner in Japanese to be able to identify the course titles in Japanese completely? Well, I randomly chose one course and initiated my

lesson. Then, I was once again irritated to find that the course did not unveil the whole show by introducing hiragana and katagana as most Japanese courses did. The main focus of the course was about the sentence patterns. The demonstration was shown in the beginning and then the sentence patterns were taught by listening to the native speaker's pronunciation. In the follow-up section, listening, speaking, reading, and writing practices were provided to cultivate learners' language ability in every aspect. I chose the speaking section and it required users to enable the microphone, but there was no button to click on so I gave up. I chose writing section and there was no instruction about how to type in Japanese. I felt I wasted my mocha coins to buy a course that I benefited nothing.

Nov. 13 In the following days, the situation did not improve at all but rather became a worse one. I not only forgot the materials I learned but also failed to use the functions of speaking and writing as previous days did. According to my professor, the system of *Livemocha* would send the friendly reminder to users' mail, reminding them to log in regularly. Nevertheless, I received nothing like notices but numerous advertisements about discounts from*Livemocha* on weekends. I felt I was confined in *Livemocha* and had no way out because my questions appeared one after another with no one to consult. I must end up the depression by making some changes. Later, something enlightening happened and brought me a streak of hope seemingly. I figured out that I was able to add my own language partners to have further interaction like text-based chat. I just sent the friend request to a Japanese native speaker, Yoko O. and she was learning English L4. I chose her because she was a native speaker in Japan that could assist my language learning. Also, I supposed her English as L4 could understand the way I expressed in English if I had the chance to interact with her later. I actively did some vocabulary exercises and uploaded for the purpose of catching her attention. I began to expect the time when I logged in *Livemocha* again to interact with her so that my questions could be solved. Guess what? Later on, I waited for one week and I did not receive any confirmation of friend requests, not to mention the rating, comments, or feedback concerning my practices. I even had no way to track the practices I had uploaded or rated earlier. What else could I do to make the situation better?

Despite the shortcomings, there was still something deserved praising. I was able to see the courses I had bought and the progress I had made in terms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing practices. The interface was shown to enable learners to examine and monitor one's learning process and thus to evaluate the learning outcome. Until now, I was still wondering whether the confining situation was due to my insufficient experience in *Livemocha*or it was simply the nature of *Livemocha*. I felt like an outsider who never fitted in no matter how hard I tried to be autonomous and responsible for my own learning. I really doubted the so-called "perfect microcosm of the real world" of *Livemocha*(Gonzalez, 2013, p.213). For me, it just left with endless mysteries and disappointments.

A reflection of the learning experiences through ecological linguistic perspective

Relations
In van Lier (2004, p9-14)'s term, "Ecological linguistic focus on language as

relations between people and the world, and on language learning as ways of relating more effectively to people and the world. The crucial concept is that of affordance."

In *Lang-8*, the relation between users and this online platform exists in the mutual feedback exchange in writing diary. The affordance mainly lies in posting diary in target language and giving corrections or feedback to each other in users' native language. Generally speaking, to both high and low language proficiency users, *Lang-8* provides complete affordance. To gain people's feedback or correction, users are inclined to correct others' diary or posting diary actively to earn L points. However, it is almost impossible for free users to get more exposure than premium users. Social alphalizersseem to control much more resources than ordinary users. In *Livemocha*, the relation between users and the online social platform exists within the framework of establishing users' holistic learning experience in terms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The affordance basically enables users the forum to exchange languages one is good at through the process of giving and receiving feedback to benefit each other's learning. Nevertheless, the affordance is not without deficiency regarding the grading criteria. Raters gain mocha coins just by rating one to five stars and thus affecting the effect of the partner's learning. They have no way to track the graded records to see the partner's following responses. Also, if the rater has no knowledge of pinyin system, he may mislead the partner.

Contexts

Context defines what languages are and sometimes are defined by languages. In the context of *Lang-8*, users are displayed in a rather authentic environment that allows them to use their target language. Despite the fact that their experiences are limited to writing, their interaction with other users are real and are able to extend to the real world. In other words, users do and are able to make friends through the system of correcting and posting diaries. Furthermore,*Lang-8* provides another forum for everyone to discuss or exchange Skype ID to each other. As for *Livemoch*a, although it includes all the four skills in its design, it seems to be not that approachable for users to have authentic interaction with other users. In order to have language partners, one may manage to keep rating or giving feedback to the same person. However, one has no way to know whether the partner is still using *Livemocha* as a learning medium actively. The practices or exercises simply disappear after one uploads. To sum up, *Lang-8* is like learning through constant diary-keeping while *Livemocha* is like a group learning which lacks collaboration.

Patterns, systems

The concept of patterns and systems is opposite to the rules and structures of languages. The language system in *Livemocha* consists of the discrete pieces of vocabulary items, phrases, and sentence patterns to form a whole while the system in *Lang-8* is broad that the patterns of the language are seen as a whole piece of writing. The framework of *Livemocha* is designed to build up users' linguistic knowledge in terms of four skills separately to prepare them for the next level. On the other hand, the designation of *Lang-8* requires users to possess the ability to combine four skills altogether and apply their linguistic knowledge to produce a whole piece of writing on their own.

Emergence

According to van Lier (2004, p9-14), "Language learning is not gradual, linear acquisition but as emergence that happens when relatively simple elements combine together to form a higher-order system."

In *Lang-8*, the repeated errors of one's writing assist users to build the understanding of the linguistic knowledge. Their awareness is raised to have a better control of language. However, this is limited to writing ability. It is unclear whether learners reflect this emergence as a whole improvement on their communicative competence, including listening, speaking, and reading. *Livemocha*, on the other hand, seems to provide a more structure-based system that facilitates language learning step by step. The courses are sorted by levels and users are suggested to begin their learning within their current ability. Let alone the quality of the courses, the users are exposed to opportunities that build up their language ability in an organized way.

Quality

Borrowed from van Lier (2004, p9-14)'s term, "Quality combines intellect andaffect and yields a higher level of consciousness that is different from educational standard". In terms of *Livemocha*, the website is qualitative in some ways. It not only provides the platform for users to undergo their language learning step by step autonomously but also includes the cultural component in language while interacting with users all over the world. Moreover, users have the access to monitor their learning progress. As a novice user, I would expect to learn and use something new daily. Instead of sending useful messages concerning the target language I am learning, *Livemocha* merely bombards me with several advertisements in almost every single day. Also, there is no surprise in *Livemocha*to keep users going forward to the next level. In order to enhance the quality to cheer users up, authentic materials are suggested to stimulate users' interest and offer them the latest information about the target culture. With this in mind, *Livemocha*has the potential to pave the way for users' practical use of the target language when having the cultural encounter with others either online or face-to-face.

As for *Lang-8*, the quality is insecure because the feedback mainly depends on others' corrections and interaction. What learners acquire is relatively trivial. However, the advantages of *Lang-8* lie in the embedded cultural elements from every user's native language because mistakes that are sociopragmatic or cultural inappropriate will also get corrected naturally from a native speakers' native instinct. In other words, *Lang-8* is suitable for high-intermediate learners because they already have organized language knowledge.

Value

As van Lier (2004, p9-14) proposed, "Value is overtly ethical and moral, embodying visions of self and identity." That is, examining in the self and identity in details.

The value of *Lang-8* is the self-accessibility and learner autonomy in practicing writing.*Lang-8* offers a platform that makes inquiring easy and interesting. Apart from that, learner autonomy is highly emphasized because learners must do something to explore in *Lang-8*. They are responsible for their own learning because they are the owner of their blogs. Furthermore, the system of L points indicates that activeness and autonomy are valued in *Lang-8* since autonomous learners get more attention and

exposure.

On the other hand, *Livemocha* is shaped by the system of language partner. With language partners, language learners are likely to benefit from the peer-learning experiences by exchanging ideas and monitoring each other's learning process. Apart from the learners' autonomy and activeness, the collaboration of language learners helps each other to move forward to the next level is what *Livemocha* highly promoted.

Critical

As van Lier (2004, p9-14) acutely pointed out, "A critical perspective examines institutional structures involved in education and argues for change and improvement from a clearly articulated ideological perspective."

As the slogan of *Livemocha* suggests, itis committed to "create a world in which every human being is fluent in multiple languages." It addresses "one of the greatest macro-economic trends of our time – globalization." However, with the overwhelming advertising mail in almost every single day from *Livemocha*, the phenomenon indicates that the website is created upon business profits. From business people's way of thinking language, how to make profits through the process of language learning is the priority. Their ideology of building the website is far beyond the goal of self-learning websites, that is, to enhance users' linguistic knowledge and prepare them the ability to be more proficient in the target language. As for the system of "mocha coins", it is not challenging at all to earn a lot within a short time as a new user. Even with so many mocha coins, the courses (product) provided are not qualitative enough for me to buy. The coins then become useless.

As what *Lang-8* promotes, their mission is "to create the world's best social language learning service" The "8" symbolizes the infinity of learning languages on this platform. In comparison with *Livemocha*, there is no advertising mail that bothers the users in *Lang-8* yet there is a far distance between the free users and premium users. Premium users get much more attention and exposure that their diaries are always shown on the first page. What's more, only premium users are allowed to exchange more than two languages. This clearly violates their spirit of the "infinity" of learning. As for the L point system, even though *Lang-8* claims that the more L points one owns, the more exposure one gets, I still feel that only premium users get attention from general users. In other words, these points do not give users as a sense of possession and achievement that make L points useless sometimes.

Variability

Variability is an indication of cultural and personal vitality. Both *Lang-8* and *Livemocha*lack the consideration of variability in their design. We could possibly argue that in *Lang-8* and *Livemocha*, users have the opportunity to find their own language partners that best facilitate their learning due to certain affective factors and that *Livemocha* provides ascending levels of materials for students. These two features, however, can be found in many kinds of social network platforms, such as language exchange groups on Facebook or online discussion board.

Diversity

van Lier (2004, p9-14) suggested that "under the normal condition, languages are with

variation. "Diversity in *Lang-8* is highly recognized since users come from all over the world." Apart from that, the criteria for language depend on every single user in *Lang-8* because users can vote for the best answer and the result will be shown to the writer. In other words, there is no definite right or wrong usage in *Lang-8*. Every language users in *Lang-8* share the knowledge and standard of the language. Diversity in *Livemocha* also manifests in worldwide users as *Lang-8* does. The courses provided are diversified not only in languages but also in topics. Users are able to choose the courses based on their needs and current ability. Despite the fact that the courses are with various levels, users may have difficulty finding the suitable ones that satisfy them since some courses are still yet to release. In terms of the curriculum design, the framework is abundant in the way that the practices are offered to train users' four skills. And each of the skill is taught with different methods and assistance of visual aids. Take vocabulary exercises for example, they are demonstrated by using flip-cards to enable users to do the follow-up self-examination. After completing and uploading the exercises, other users have the access to evaluate one's work based on the multi-facet grading criteria. They can choose either star-rating or feedback-giving.

Activity

In van Lier's definition, "Ecological perspective views language as activity, not object". In *Lang-8*, the main activity that users experience is writing diaries in target language. Nevertheless, the function of blog is not confined to the format of simply sharing personal feelings or insights. Some learners post their homework on the blog, searching for help from native speakers. Others post a series of translation assignments as their diaries. No matter what their purposes are, they demonstrate their autonomy by extending the use of blogs freely. As for *Livemocha,* apart from helping others to earn "mocha coins" and using the coins to buy one's favorable language courses, how to handle with the cultural encounter with language partners is also one of the activities that users would face. As the nature of *Livemocha* suggests, the designation of language partner lies mostly in learner's autonomy as *Lang-8* does. Users may find it necessary to interact with the same individual with high frequency based on the system of language partner. When one's friend request of language partner is confirmed, one is likely to resolve problems within the online context and have further interaction culturally and linguistically. As a consequence, one's motivation in the community of practice may be enhanced and one's sense of belonging may be defined.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we feel that business people should understand how learners actually do and experience in these learning websites. Learners' motivation of language learning is very important and precious. Once learners lose the interest for the new learning platform, it is likely that learners rather choose another way to assist their learning or simply quit learning. In other words, the ecosystem of the websites is imbalanced that new comers could not receive proper affordance to support them.

We believe that there are complicated elements behind the operation of such online learning websites and that it is unlikely to make a perfect online learning environment due to various reasons. However, we still expect this paper can offer website designers some implications and suggestions from the standpoint of the learners, making the best use of current technology with language teaching.

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