



Information and Knowledge Society Doctoral Programme

Open University of Catalonia

DOCTORAL THESIS

SOCIAL NETWORKING IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Informal Online Interactions

Discussed by:
Maria Luisa Malerba Candilio

Directed by:
Dr. Christine Appel

Barcelona, 2015

To my family

“Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own.”

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Summary

Previous research has identified some problems in relation to online communities. Firstly, in online communities for Second Language (L2) learning there seems to be a disparity between the initial engagement of L2 learners and the gradual decrease of their level of commitment over time, so that active members often turn into less committed learners. From this, it is possible to suppose that these online communities are not suitable for meeting long-term learning outcomes. Secondly, as previous research has shown, the main tendency of general social networks such as *Facebook* is to strengthen social ties among people who often are already connected in their offline lives. In contrast, one of the purposes of online communities for L2 learning is to encourage learners to intertwine new online social bonds which can be weak and fragmentary. Moreover, in previous research it is not clear whether in these online communities learners' primary goal is social interaction or language learning. More research is needed to assess what environmental features of these communities foster or impede opportunities for the use of the target language with the other networkers. Similarly, it is essential to shed more light on the dynamics of these platforms, and on its affordances and constraints. Finally, more investigation is needed to understand under what conditions the interactions occurring in these online communities cement the relationship between the language partners over time, what types of bonds learners create over time, what learning outcomes are generated from learners' online interactions and what strategies they enact during the interactions to create opportunities for L2 use.

The objectives of this thesis are: (1) to analyse the potential effectiveness of these communities for long-term learning outcomes; (2) to examine learners' construction of opportunities for L2 use in these environments; (3) to explore affordances and constraints of online communities.

To this end, a longitudinal multiple ethnographic case study approach was used under the theoretical framework of Socio-Cultural Theory and Activity Theory (AT). The methodology is mainly qualitative and it consists of 6 phases: (1) contextualization, during which the two online communities of the investigation were identified, *Livemocha* and

Busuu; (2) fieldwork, to observe learners' learning experience in the two online communities selected for the study; (3) online survey, submitted to learners to find out about their language experience; (4) semi-structured interviews to elicit more information about learners' subjective experience and perceptions of these communities; (5) case studies and a micro-analysis of their online interactions to identify the ways in which they create opportunities for L2 use; (6) recall interviews to trace knowledge of their learning experience over time.

The findings empirically confirmed that there is a decrease in learners' engagement with the platform over time due to intrinsic contradictions in the structure of these communities, which has important pedagogical and social implications. In addition, the results delineated the presence of different profiles of learners to which correspond different actions and ways of interacting in these platforms. The results, in general, showed evidence of different forms of peer-assistance among learners and their ability to maintain both the social and the learning trajectory during their interactions.

The research concludes with a critical reflection on the role of learner autonomy as a pre-requirement for an effective learning experience to take root in these environments, as this study clearly demonstrates. Moreover, the study translates the findings obtained (affordances and constraints of these online communities) into a set of pedagogical recommendations for platform developers, learners and teachers, of use for maximising the advantages of L2 learning in online communities as well as having possible applications to formal learning settings.

Acknowledgements

During the challenging and productive years it took me to conduct this study and to complete this thesis, a great number of people have accompanied and supported me. They deserve my heartfelt gratitude. To begin with, my deepest thanks go to my supervisor from the Open University of Catalonia, Christine Appel. Without her endless patience, precious guidance, constant encouragement, constructive critics on my work and invaluable presence, it would be impossible to tell this story. What I learned from her will shape my career forever.

I own a huge debt of gratitude to Derrick de Kerckhove for his unfailing support and for making this important life experience possible. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to pursue my interest in investigation and for opening up the way to the academia. I wish to thank Matteo Ciastellardi for the stimulating and productive discussions and for enduring my thesis mood-swings. A big thanks also to Cristina Miranda de Almeida and Bruce William Powe for understanding so well what I was going through and for their caring presence.

A huge thanks to the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute (IN3) and to my colleagues who shared with me the ups and down of PhD life. Our interconnectedness both inside and outside of the institutional walls has been a great source of insights throughout these years. Thank you in particular to Sarah Wagner and Ian Freeman for the English revisions of some chapters. Thank you to the whole staff of the IN3, the UOC and the eLearnCenter for their kind help in many occasions. Thank you to Jessica, Ivan, Luca and Isidoro for being my natural mood enhancers especially in the final phase.

Thank you to Mike Levy for having a couple of meetings with me for thesis discussion and for his precious suggestions. Thank you also to Vincenza Tudini for her aid before writing chapter 4 in occasion of a couple of meetings in Barcelona and León.

My sincere gratitude goes to my participants, who generously co-operated with this research project, who shared their time and ideas during the data collection period and who, expressing their genuine interest and curiosity about the outcome of the study,

encouraged and gave me strength in the writing phase. I am grateful to my students of Italian even though they were not involved in this project. Thank you also to all the colleagues involved in the *SpeakApps* and *TandemMOOC* project. You have been a big source of inspiration and I have learned a lot from you for this thesis.

Special thanks go to *Livemocha* Company for their collaboration with the online survey submission and for answering all my emails. Special thanks to Morena Ragone for her aid with legal terminology when redacting the informed consent for the participants of this study.

I am also greatly indebted to all the people and colleagues met at conferences, seminars, workshops and on the cyberspace who did not hesitate having productive discussions and sharing materials and bits of knowledge with me.

Thank you to Bruno M. for always being there and for his loving, caring and attentive presence, especially in the phase of the final effort. I am forever grateful to my friends here in Barcelona for sharing with me unforgettable moments in these years, for their enthusiasm and for believing in my work. Thank you also to my flat-mates for contributing to create a harmonic and creative atmosphere in the house and for encouraging me to continue working.

My gratitude also goes to my beloved and wonderful family in Italy, for surrounding me in a supportive and peaceful environment during all the period I have been carrying out this work and for never giving up encouraging me to finish.

I would also like to thank my Italian friends for their support and understanding in a moment of difficult decisions and steps I have taken in life. I would like to thank from the deepest of my heart my best friend since our early childhood, Valeria B., for helping me and for her constant presence and encouragement in the good and bad times alike.

Thank you also to those who used to be friends and accompanied me for a while and to those who sent me their energy and strength from the other part of the globe.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-------------|
| <i>Summary</i> | <i>v</i> |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | <i>vii</i> |
| <i>Table of Contents</i> | <i>ix</i> |
| <i>List of Tables</i> | <i>xii</i> |
| <i>List of Figures</i> | <i>xiii</i> |
| <i>Key to Abbreviations</i> | <i>xiv</i> |
| Introduction | 1 |
| I. Research Background | 1 |
| II. Scope of the Thesis | 5 |
| III. Thesis Outline | 7 |
| [CHAPTER 1] | 9 |
| Learning in the Network Society: Overview of the | 9 |
| New Challenges | 9 |
| 1.1. Understanding L2 learning in today’s digital society | 10 |
| 1.1.1. Social media and change of context in educational processes | 12 |
| 1.1.2. Lifelong L2 learners in online communities | 14 |
| 1.1.3. Formal, non-formal, informal lifelong L2 learning | 17 |
| 1.2. SNSs and online communities for L2 learning | 28 |
| 1.2.1. Telecollaboration practices in L2 learning..... | 35 |
| 1.2.2. L2 learning practices and studies in SNSs | 39 |
| 1.2.3. Studies about L2 learning in online communities..... | 45 |
| 1.2.4. How this study contributes to the field..... | 54 |
| 1.3. Conclusion | 57 |
| [CHAPTER 2] | 59 |
| Theoretical Framework and Methodology | 59 |
| 2.1. The purpose of the study | 59 |
| 2.1.1. The objectives and the research questions | 60 |
| 2.2. The social dimension of L2 learning in online communities | 62 |
| 2.2.1. Sociocultural Theory and ZPD in online communities for L2 learning | 63 |
| 2.2.2. Activity Theory applied to online communities for L2 learning | 68 |
| 2.2.3. Learner autonomy and online communities for L2 learning | 78 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| 2.3. SCMC and online interactions..... | 82 |
| 2.3.1. Criteria and taxonomy for the micro-analysis of the online interactions..... | 82 |
| 2.3.2. Language selection in SCMC situations | 89 |
| 2.4. Research Design..... | 94 |
| 2.4.1. Methodological decisions driving the investigation and the 6 phases | 94 |
| 2.4.2. Online ethnography and multiple case study approach..... | 97 |
| 2.5. Conclusion | 101 |
| [CHAPTER 3] | 103 |
| Results (phases I-IV)..... | 103 |
| 3.1. Contextualization and fieldwork..... | 103 |
| 3.1.1. The current scenario of online communities for L2 learning..... | 104 |
| 3.1.2. The selection of the online communities for the investigation: Livemocha and Busuu..... | 108 |
| 3.1.3. First ethnographic observations about the L2 learning communities..... | 117 |
| 3.2. From the fieldwork to the online survey..... | 120 |
| 3.2.1. Method: the online anonymous survey | 120 |
| 3.2.2. Subjects and data collection..... | 122 |
| 3.2.3. Analysis | 124 |
| 3.2.4. Discussion of the results | 143 |
| 3.3. From the online survey to the online interviews | 150 |
| 3.3.1. Method: the interviews | 150 |
| 3.3.2. Subjects and data collection..... | 152 |
| 3.3.3. Codification..... | 154 |
| 3.3.4. Analysis | 159 |
| 3.3.5. Discussion of the results | 169 |
| 3.4. Conclusion | 178 |
| [CHAPTER 4] | 181 |
| Results (phases V-VI)..... | 181 |
| 4.1. The collection of the online interactions and the recall interviews.... | 181 |
| 4.1.1. Introduction to the case studies | 183 |
| 4.1.2. Collection and transcription of online interaction data | 185 |
| 4.1.3. Recall interviews for the case studies..... | 187 |
| 4.2. Case 1 - Learner William..... | 190 |
| 4.2.1. Linguistic background..... | 190 |
| 4.2.2. Language use patterns and opportunities | 192 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| 4.2.3. Language selection and its negotiation..... | 204 |
| 4.3. Case 2 – Learner Nastya..... | 209 |
| 4.3.1. Linguistic background..... | 209 |
| 4.3.2. Language use patterns and opportunities | 210 |
| 4.3.3. Language selection and its negotiation..... | 219 |
| 4.4. Case 3 – Learner Jelena | 224 |
| 4.4.1. Linguistic background..... | 224 |
| 4.4.2. Language use patterns and opportunities | 225 |
| 4.4.3. Language selection and its negotiation..... | 237 |
| 4.5. Discussion | 244 |
| 4.6. Conclusion | 253 |
| [CHAPTER 5] | 255 |
| Discussion: L2 learning in online communities | 255 |
| 5.1. Integrating theory and cases: final outcomes..... | 255 |
| 5.1.1. Activity Theory and the discussion of findings..... | 256 |
| 5.1.2. Research questions revisited | 269 |
| 5.2. Turning obstacles into opportunities for L2 learning | 274 |
| 5.2.1. Pedagogical recommendations for the online communities | 275 |
| 5.2.2. Pedagogical recommendations for L2 learners | 285 |
| 5.2.3. Pedagogical recommendations for teachers | 288 |
| 5.3. Conclusive arguments | 290 |
| 5.3.1. Ethical considerations..... | 290 |
| 5.3.2. Main contributions and final remarks | 293 |
| 5.3.3. Directions for future research | 299 |
| Conclusions | 303 |
| References..... | 307 |
| Appendices | 339 |
| <i>Appendix A. Criteria for the selection of the online communities.....</i> | <i>339</i> |
| <i>Appendix B. The online survey.....</i> | <i>353</i> |
| <i>Appendix C. Script of the semi-structured interviews</i> | <i>361</i> |
| <i>Appendix D. The informed consent</i> | <i>364</i> |
| <i>Appendix E. Codification in Atlas.ti.....</i> | <i>369</i> |
| <i>Appendix F. Script of the 2nd cycle of interviews to Livemocha and Busuu users</i> | <i>377</i> |
| <i>Appendix G. Script of the recall interviews for the case studies.....</i> | <i>378</i> |
| <i>Appendix H. Observations about the interview phase. Excerpts from the researcher’s diary.....</i> | <i>379</i> |

List of Tables

| | |
|--|-----|
| Table 2.1 Classification of peer feedback for the analysis | 84 |
| Table 2.2 Taxonomy for the analysis of the online interactions..... | 86 |
| Table 3.1 Sample demographics: background information on survey respondents | 126 |
| Table 3.2 Duration and frequency of learners' activity in <i>Livemocha</i> | 131 |
| Table 3.3 Learners' opinions about learning in the online community | 138 |
| Table 4.1 Data for each learner..... | 184 |
| Table 4.2 Transcription conventions | 186 |
| Table 4.3 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.1 | 192 |
| Table 4.4 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.2..... | 193 |
| 4.5 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.3 | 195 |
| Table 4.6 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.4..... | 197 |
| Table 4.7 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.5 | 199 |
| Table 4.8 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.6 | 201 |
| Table 4.9 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.7 | 202 |
| Table 4.10 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.8..... | 203 |
| Table 4.11 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.9..... | 205 |
| Table 4.12 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.10..... | 207 |
| Table 4.13 Peer feedback in excerpt 2.1 | 211 |
| Table 4.14 Peer feedback in excerpt 2.2..... | 214 |
| Table 4.15 Peer feedback in excerpt 2.3..... | 216 |
| Table 4.16 Peer feedback in excerpt 2.4..... | 218 |
| Table 4.17 Peer feedback in excerpt 2.5..... | 220 |
| Table 4.18 Peer feedback in excerpt 2.6..... | 223 |
| Table 4.19 Peer feedback in excerpt 3.1..... | 228 |
| Table 4.20 Peer feedback in excerpt 3.2..... | 230 |
| Table 4.21 Peer feedback in excerpt 3.3..... | 233 |
| Table 4.22 Peer feedback in excerpt 3.4..... | 236 |
| Table 4.23 Peer feedback in excerpt 3.5..... | 239 |
| Table 4.24 Peer feedback in excerpt 3.6..... | 242 |
| Table 5.1 Social interactions vs social networking (adapted from Lamy & Zourou, 2013) | 282 |

List of Figures

| | |
|--|-----|
| Fig. 2.1 Leont'ev's model of AT..... | 69 |
| Fig. 2.2 Engeström's (1987) model of Activity Theory..... | 70 |
| Fig. 2.3 The learning activity in <i>Livemocha</i> and <i>Busuu</i> communities adapted from Engeström's (1987) model | 71 |
| Fig. 2.4 The six methodological phases of the investigation..... | 96 |
| Fig. 3.1 <i>Livemocha</i> 's main profile page | 112 |
| Fig. 3.2 Example of a lesson in <i>Livemocha</i> | 113 |
| Fig. 3.3 Example of peer feedback in <i>Livemocha</i> | 114 |
| Fig. 3.4 <i>Busuu</i> 's main profile page..... | 115 |
| Fig. 3.5 Example of one lesson and comments in <i>Busuu</i> | 117 |
| Fig. 3.6 Age of the survey respondents | 126 |
| Fig. 3.7 Main languages learned in <i>Livemocha</i> | 129 |
| Fig. 3.8 Reasons for learning in <i>Livemocha</i> | 133 |
| Fig. 3.9 Personal use of <i>Livemocha</i> | 135 |
| Fig. 3.10 Learners' evaluation of <i>Livemocha</i> 's benefits..... | 137 |
| Fig. 3.11 The 10 families of codes split into 2 main categories | 155 |
| Fig. 3.12 Country of origin of the interviewees..... | 160 |
| Fig. 3.13 Main TL of the interviewees..... | 161 |
| Fig. 3.14 Age groups of the population interviewed | 162 |
| Fig. 5.1 The learning activity in <i>Livemocha</i> and <i>Busuu</i> communities adapted from Engeström's model taking into account the "course taker" (learner profile 1)..... | 257 |
| Fig. 5.2 The learning activity in <i>Livemocha</i> and <i>Busuu</i> communities adapted from Engeström's model taking into account the "social networker" (learner profile 2). | 258 |
| Fig. 5.3 The learning activity in <i>Livemocha</i> and <i>Busuu</i> communities adapted from Engeström's model taking into account the "social course taker" (learner profile 3).... | 260 |
| Fig. 5.4 Joint activity system of the 3 profiles of learners (adapted from Engeström, 2001 and Blin, 2012)..... | 266 |

Key to Abbreviations

| | |
|------|--|
| AT | Activity Theory |
| CA | Conversation Analysis |
| CALL | Computer Assisted Language Learning |
| CEFR | Common European Framework of Reference for Languages |
| CHAT | Cultural Historical Activity Theory |
| CMC | Computer Mediated Communication |
| EFL | English as a Foreign Language |
| FL | Foreign Language |
| L1 | First Language (Native Language) |
| L2 | Second Language or Foreign Language |
| LLP | Lifelong Learning Programme |
| LMS | Learning Management System |
| LRE | Language Related Episode |
| MKO | More Knowledgeable Other |
| NNS | Non-Native Speaker |
| NS | Native Speaker |
| PLE | Personal Learning Environment |
| SCMC | Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication |
| SL | Second Language |
| SLA | Second Language Acquisition |
| SNS | Social Network Site |
| TBLT | Tasked-Based Language Teaching and Learning |
| TL | Target Language |
| VLE | Virtual Learning Environment |
| VoIP | Voice over Internet Protocol |
| WTC | Willingness to Communicate |
| ZPD | Zone of Proximal Development |

Introduction

“The limits of my language are the limits of my world.”

–Ludwig Wittgenstein

I. Research Background

The Internet revolution has been inexorably fast and overwhelming. Not only did language learning overcome geographical and temporal borders, but it also went far beyond the traditional paradigms of formal education. Current L2 learners are presented with a wide range of voice applications, social networks, video-sharing websites, podcasts, wikis and blogs, and are integrating more and more the traditional book-oriented way of learning a language with the social web. Social Network Sites (SNSs) allow learners to cross geographical and temporal barriers, to access distant cultures and places, to interact with multiple native speakers (NSs) simultaneously and to send and receive messages, as well as upload and share photos and videos.

Among the different online applications that arose with the social web, there are online communities designed for second language (L2) learning such as *Livemocha*, *Busuu*, *Babbel* and/or *Palabea*. These communities are designed as common SNSs but the difference is that they are characterized by providing learning content and material in the selected target language (TL). In addition, they are designed such that learners are put in contact with NSs from all over the world with whom they can partake in language exchanges, offering their native language (L1) for the opportunity to practice their TL. The pedagogical basis of these communities is tandem language learning, which consists in a language partnership in which each learner is an expert of his/her interlocutor's TL. Given that the communities are untied to formal learning institutions and that the activities in the communities are somewhat structured and carried out consciously by learners, this study is carried out in a non-formal learning context. However, as the study will show, the communities are a clear example of how formal, non-formal and informal spheres are intertwined.

This thesis, broadly, sits at the intersection between the idea of online communities fostering new opportunities for a motivating and collaborative informal L2 learning process, and the rise of new blurred models of L2 teaching and learning, which are not unidirectional. These environments, based on the social web but designed to foster language learning, raise some important questions on the way online users make use of the tools offered on the language learning platforms, and the behaviours they enact when inhabiting the communities. In particular, this study looks at learners' construction of opportunities for L2 use in these language learning communities.

This thesis offers insights on lifelong learning processes and on the continuity between formal and informal learning contexts, by shedding light on the dynamics occurring among learners in online communities designed for language learning, with a particular focus on their tandem relationships. Collaboration between tandem partners is reflected in the following aspects: mutual support, equal contribution, same extent of benefits and equal roles (as learners or experts). Taking these aspects into account, this thesis develops a better understanding of the tandem partnerships learners establish in online communities: how they offer and respond to online assistance, how they define social roles, and how NSs suggest corrective feedback. This research also addresses the pedagogical needs of online learners and highlights the importance of the design of the learning environment. In particular, it aims to provide a better understanding of the social aspect of L2 learning and the field of telecollaboration, drawing on learners' spontaneous interactions in a non-formal out-of-class context. In fact, in the out-of class context of these online communities, non-understanding is authentic rather than pedagogically motivated. It is therefore important to provide lifelong language learners with opportunities to engage in and reflect on naturalistic repair trajectories, which require collaboration with NSs, such as those of the online chats. These environments have a potential for SLA, with pedagogical repair trajectories coexisting with social ones (Tudini, 2010). Finally, this study informs research in the area, as well as teachers, tutors and practitioners, and raises awareness on the adequate use of these communities to make more informed choices with regard to the role of social networking practices and L2 learning. In part, this thesis is also addressed to lifelong online L2 learners interested in integrating online learning practices with more traditional forms of learning.

The study is an extension and a contribution to 3 main areas of interest:

- 1) L2 practices using SNSs
- 2) Online communities designed for L2 learning
- 3) Telecollaboration

The analysis of L2 practices using SNSs (1) (Blattner & Fiori, 2009, 2011; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012a, 2012b; Halvorsen, 2009; Kelley, 2010a, 2010b; McCarty, 2009) has occurred in formal learning contexts and under a sociocultural framework. This body of research has revealed that social networking practices in general present good prospects for language learning because they favour interactions among learners, motivating their language process. This study adds insights to the field because it takes into account the perception of online learners who have been selected in online communities rather than in a classroom context, who practice languages online without teachers and who do not depend on a syllabus or on evaluation. In addition, since the aforementioned studies are mainly quantitative, they did not fully take into account learners' points of view in relation to the environment they inhabit. More investigation is necessary to analyse learners' behaviours, the quality and types of their online interactions over time and the strategies learners enact to use the language and seek out advantages in their language partnership.

In the realm of online communities designed specifically for L2 learning (2), the literature has shed light on the affordances and constraints of these online communities from technical and pedagogical points of view. The literature has also stressed that these online communities could play an important role if integrated in formal learning and in telecollaborative practices (Brick, 2011; Chotel, 2012; Chotel & Mangenot, 2011; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Lloyd, 2012). Moreover, these online communities differ from generic SNSs such as *Facebook*. The main objective of generic SNSs is to connect users that most often are already connected in their offline lives in order to strengthen their social bonds. In contrast, online communities designed for L2 learning connect online users that do not know each other. In other words, the main purpose of these online communities is to foster the establishment of new ties among learners. These learners join the communities because they want to meet NSs of the TL and because most of the times the NSs of the TL are not present in their offline social networks. As previous research has underlined (Chotel, 2012; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Liaw, 2011), these interactions occur at random and are weak. In relation to this, there are issues deserving

further study and exploration. More research is needed which investigates online learners over a longer period of time and whether, how and why some learners are able to build an online network of language partners after facing short interactional situations at random. In addition, further research is needed on learners' preferred mode of communication and the reasons behind this choice. Also, taking into account the different affordances of these communities, more research is needed to assess which learners prefer certain tools and other learners prefer others and why.

Finally, considering that the SCMC (Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication) occurring between learners in online communities for language learning is a form of telecollaboration as it fosters the development of intercultural and conversational skills, the third main area of studies underlying this thesis is telecollaboration practices in online environments (3). Research in this field has mainly focused on the telecollaboration between distant learners interacting in their respective native languages through online chats and on the process of socialization in the L2 (Black, 2007, 2008, 2009; Lam, 2000, 2004, 2009; Pasfield-Neofitou, 2007a, 2007b, 2009). These studies found that the chat strengthened these relations and that the visual nature of the textual chat facilitated corrective feedback when learners' primary goal was language learning rather than social interaction. Tudini (2010) explored the role of online chat in supporting the teaching and learning of Italian in open-ended tasks and in out-of-class settings. She identified important aspects occurring in synchronous textual conversations such as repair, negotiation of meaning, peer assistance, visual saliency and noticing. Gonzales' (2012) study on telecollaboration is very insightful since it relies on naturalistic data in *Livemocha*. This study revolved around the L2 pragmatic development (strategies in conversation closings) in SCMC carrying out the analysis of user perception interviews and online interactions of a group of students participating in *Livemocha* during an academic course. She analysed learners' conversations over time and found several different types of conversation closings increasingly more complex and articulated over time. The present study makes a contribution to telecollaboration research both at a micro and a macro level. At a micro level, it provides longitudinal, naturalistic data of spontaneous interactions among learners in a SCMC context, within communities designed for L2 learning and in the absence of institutional organization and pedagogical intervention. At a macro level, it researches how peer assistance is established among learners and learners' perceptions on their L2 learning process in the online communities at large.

Previous studies and how this thesis contributes to the field will be described in more detail in Chapter 1. The next section outlines the research objectives and questions.

II. Scope of the Thesis

Drawing on the existing literature and taking into account the literature gaps, Chapter 2 concerns the research aims, the research questions, the theoretical framework and the research design of this study.

The objectives and the research questions of this dissertation cover three main areas: learners' behaviours (1), peer assistance (2) and time factor (3). These three main areas are considered from two different perspectives: didactic and social affordances of the platforms.

The objectives of this thesis are as follows:

- a. To learn about the dynamics generated within online communities designed for L2 learning, taking into account learner autonomy and learners' goals.
- b. To investigate whether learners create opportunities (and how) for interaction with their peers while they experience these communities and how peer assistance unfolds.
- c. To determine the effectiveness of online communities for meeting long-term learning outcomes and the relationship between the affordances of these communities and learners' engagement over time.

Accordingly, there are two broad research questions regarding both the social and the didactical affordances of the online communities. The first research question covers the areas of learners' behaviours and peer assistance, while the second research question covers the area of time factor.

1st Question. What kinds of opportunities for L2 use occur in the online communities for L2 learning and what social and contextual factors affect and contribute to the construction of such opportunities and to learners' perceptions of L2 learning?

2nd Question. What are the affordances and constraints of the online communities for L2 learning in relation to their effectiveness for long-term learning outcomes?

The overarching theoretical basis of this thesis is Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory. A number of studies that assess the potential of online communities for L2 learning (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Halvorsen, 2009; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; McCarty, 2009) draw upon sociocultural theory in order to achieve a richer understanding of their dynamics. According to this theory, social contexts are crucial to understand L2 learning, and personal, interpersonal and social factors have a strong influence on access to linguistic resources, interactional opportunities and L2 learning outcomes. Two key concepts for this thesis derive from the work of Vygotsky (1978): the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and "scaffolding" (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). Language learning processes emerge from the interrelationship between learners and the environment. The sociocultural approach is pertinent in the case of L2 learning and online communities because it links cognitive and social processes and because it provides a further window into how language is acquired through collaborative interaction.

From the work of Vygotsky, Sociocultural Activity Theory (CHAT) originated, also known as Activity Theory (AT), which was further developed first by Leont'ev (1978) and then by Engeström (1987). This thesis applies Engeström's (1987) model of AT to online communities for language learning. The adoption of AT as an underpinning framework and its application to *Livemocha* and *Busuu* online communities permitted me to explain the division of labour and the social roles and norms among learners while they are interacting in online communities. It also allowed a deeper investigation of learners' goal-driven strategies in their learning experience and the possible incompatibility of two goals (i.e. grammar accuracy vs self-confidence in speaking the L2) or two motives (social interaction vs language learning) (Kurata, 2011, 2014).

After explaining the criteria employed for the micro-analysis of learners' online interactions, chapter 2 describes the methodology adopted, which, in accordance with the interpretative framework of this study, follows a mainly qualitative approach and makes use of different observation strategies. This study adopts an interpretative paradigm and a longitudinal multiple case study approach. A wide range of qualitative methods has been adopted, from an online survey and semi-structured interviews to the collection of

samples of interactive discourse occurring in online social networks. In this way, methodological triangulation, that is, the use of different methods to corroborate each other, allowed the cross-checking of the data collected, improving further internal validity. The methodology adopted is funnel-shaped and it consists of 6 phases. These phases are: *contextualization (I)*, *fieldwork (II)*, *survey (III)*, *interviews (IV)*, *online interactions (V)*, *recall interviews (VI)*. Each phase opens up the way to the subsequent phase, developing an increasingly deeper understanding of the behaviours enacted by informal learners in these communities, of the modalities in which peer assistance occurs, and of the different types of assistance they provide each other.

III. Thesis Outline

The previous sections of the introduction have described the context of the investigation, the most relevant contributions to the field of social networking in L2 learning and the present contribution of this work to the existing research (chapter 1). The aforementioned sections have also outlined the aims and the research questions at the basis of this study, the theoretical framework and the research design underlying the investigation (chapter 2). In this section, I provide an outline of how the investigation unfolds across its 6 phases in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 tackles the first 4 phases of the investigation. In phase I (*contextualization*), I provide an overview of the existing scenario of the online communities for L2 learning. Following that, I explain the reasons for selecting *Livemocha* and *Busuu* as well as describe the context of these two online communities. Phase II (*fieldwork*) is ethnographic and is characterized by the researcher inhabiting these communities as a normal user to become familiar with their norms and rules. In this phase, I report the initial ethnographic observations that allowed me to proceed with phase III (*survey*), designing a survey for the online learners of these communities. The results of the survey revealed important aspects of learners' experiences in these communities, on their level of engagement in relation to the time-factor and on their patterns of behaviour. These results were further confirmed in phase IV (*interviews*). Through semi-structured interviews not only was I able to corroborate the results of the survey, but also I was able to answer the research questions about learner autonomy, time-factor, learners' behaviours and, in part, peer assistance.

The analysis of peer assistance is the object of Chapter 4 and opens the way to phase V (*online interactions*). In this phase I identified 3 case studies and I analysed learners' spontaneous creation of opportunities to practice the language in their informal scaffolded interactions with other learners. More specifically, I started an in-depth examination of different forms of peer assistance taking place in the communities and explored the strategies enacted by learners during their interactions. The combination of AT and Conversation Analysis (CA) allowed me to explore some of the important factors that contribute to the difficulties experienced by learners in constructing opportunities for L2 use and learning following Kurata's (2011) model. Finally, in phase VI (*recall interviews*) I interviewed the participants at a time distance from the initial interviews and, in this way, was able to analyse the sustainability of interactions between learners, how their network evolved over time and the implications for their language learning.

The final chapter (Chapter 5) brings together the theoretical and empirical findings of the previous chapters. The discussion in chapter 5 answers the research questions and gathers, compares and contrasts the results obtained in the different phases of the investigation. Hence, merging these results, it analyses the online communities under the lens of AT. With the application of Engeström's (1987) AT, it is possible to look at the interplay of several important elements of the triangle (division of labour-rules-motive) within the system. This allows me to identify with more clarity the contradictions present in these online communities and in learners' pedagogical behaviours with their peers and leads to the formulation of some pedagogical recommendations directed to learners for the improvement of their language experience in these communities. Finally, the chapter explains the contribution the research makes to the social aspect of L2 learning, to the field of telecollaboration, to the field of language selection, and to the new ethical issues and problems in the field of online ethnography. The chapter also outlines the limitations of the investigation and areas for further research, particularly underlining that future research should insist on the idea of "bridging activities" (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008) between the SCMC occurring in out-of-class informal settings and the learning activities taking place in the formal context of the language classroom.

[CHAPTER 1]

Learning in the Network Society: Overview of the New Challenges

“A different language is a different vision of life.”

-Federico Fellini

Under the perspective of the 60s, the sociologist Marshall McLuhan anticipated a reshaping of formal and traditional education (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967; McLuhan & Leonard, 1967; McLuhan & Powers, 1989) and was able to foresee the changes of education that are currently arising in the environment of electronic communication technologies.

To begin with, McLuhan (1960:207) argued that the traditional classroom is “an obsolete detention home, a feudal dungeon” and that it had not changed much in comparison to the beginning of the 20th century in terms of layout, method and content of instruction (McLuhan & Leonard, 1967). Then, he predicted important changes in the structures and roles of education in the era of electronic communication, which include the idea of a flexible, multi-disciplinary, problem-solving oriented learning, blurred distinctions between learners and teachers and fuzzy boundaries between work and entertainment, learner-centred learning, cooperation and communication among learners (Lynch, 2002; McLuhan & Leonard, 1967). According to McLuhan, the electronic era would lead to a rejection of the division and hierarchical compartmentalization of knowledge, to the refusal of specialization and sharp roles’ distinctions, and to the predominance of processes and perception over conceptual bias (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967).

Today’s learning with social media clearly reflects McLuhan’s observations. Collaborative and creative learning are encouraged, problem-solving skills are required, formal and informal learning spheres are overlapping. The key-goal of education institutions is to empower students to take control of their own learning and to navigate and interact in online communities and SNSs, which probably best represent this educational shift. The main focus of this thesis is online communities as an educational context for language

learners. In order to frame the discussion on this issue better, it is important to provide a more general context to this dissertation. The first chapter of this thesis, starting with a general description of our current learning setting, which echo McLuhan's past observations, explores some of the many innovations introduced by the network society that are related to the rise of new learning environments and forms of learning, focusing in particular on the opportunities opened to L2 learners. After this contextualization, this chapter starts providing the first definitions and the key-issues of this thesis. Hence, the chapter revises the literature about SNSs and online communities for L2 learning, focusing on the main themes that emerged from previous studies and on L2 learning practices. Then, the chapter explains how this study will make its contribution to the field.

1.1. Understanding L2 learning in today's digital society

In the novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* by Hugo, one of the main characters, Frollo, is holding in his hand a printed book and, while pointing his finger at the cathedral outside of the window, he pronounces the following sentence in French: *Ceci tuera cela* (this will kill that). The novel is set approximately 30 years after 1455, when Gutenberg published the first printed Bible. Frollo, as Eco (1996) explained, with his sentence, was referring to the fact that the book (the Bible, *ceci*) will kill the cathedral (*cela*), that the alphabet will kill images. In other words, the alphabet contained in the words and in the pages of the books, would have allowed its readers to “see” and learn about the world and would have replaced the fundamental role played by cathedrals' stained glass windows depicting Bible stories and tales, which once were the alphabet of the people (*Biblia pauperum*). According to Eco (1996), McLuhan would have stated the same comparing a Manhattan discotheque to the Gutenberg Galaxy and, similarly, he observed that today it would be possible to maintain that the computer will kill the book. Eco's considerations finally lead to the conclusions that, rather than taking these sentences literally, it should be acknowledged that the book has not disappeared in the same way as images have not been swallowed up by the print. Simply, the book (and the alphabet) is incorporated and has to co-exist with the new revolutionary forms of learning that are taking place through the spread of networked, digital information and communications technologies (Eco, 1996).

To this regard, Eco (1996) makes a remarkable point about language learning. While in the past the only possibilities offered to learners of a foreign language (FL) were traveling abroad and studying the language on the books, nowadays “the concept of literacy

comprises many media” (p. 298) and L2 learners have many other ways to improve their language skills, from watching movies and listening to records to reading the label of a globalized product. Therefore, according to him, “an enlightened policy of literacy must take into account the possibilities of all of these media. Educational concern must be extended to the whole of media (p. 298)”. These words date back to the dawn of the Internet, when emails began to spread and the first online chat rooms were starting to connect people speaking different languages from distant places in the world. From that moment on, the Internet has flourished. Current L2 learners have the possibility to learn a language integrating books and social media. The term “learning” itself is being constantly explored and redefined according to the needs of interaction of today’s learners and to the new opportunities offered by the era of the so called “network society”.

Under the expression Network Society, Castells (2000) refers to several different phenomena marking the beginning of the Information Age and related to the social, political, economic and cultural changes caused by the constant evolution of the web. Communication technologies allowed rapid synchronous and asynchronous communication and led to the annihilation of time and space. This means that the fastness of multimodal communication pervading the web has increased to such an extent that geographical and temporal distances are no longer a barrier and that there is a common perception that the world shrank, because it has become possible to share anything, anytime and anywhere. Moreover, today networks detain the power (Castells, 2000; 2011). In other words, digital networks are powerful interrelated systems that possess all the information and distribute it horizontally (without hierarchies) with their multiple nodes (Castells, 2011). Rather than a new form of social organization, “networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies” (Castells, 2000:500).

In such a scenario, among the main challenges that the network society poses, Castells (2001) mentions the restructuration of the educational system. He stresses that one of the main objectives of the network society is acquiring the skills to learn how to learn throughout one’s lifespan, and being able to retrieve, recombine and make use of this information to accomplish one’s needs. This objective corresponds to the “enlightened policy of literacy” mentioned earlier by Eco (1996) and that consists in looking for new ways to redefine learning practices towards the convergence of all media and to take advantage of their potential. The web has probably reached its maturity but the response

of our societies' educational systems to these innovations seems not to be yet mature enough.

According to Castells, the whole education system of the industrial era is obsolete and, in his own words:

“we need a new pedagogy, based on interactivity, personalization, and the development of autonomous capacity of learning and thinking. While, at the same time, strengthening the character and securing the personality”.

(Castells, 2001: 278)

The premise at the bases of these words is twofold: often learning environments are used as a repository where to deliver content according to the traditional ways of conceiving learning and to teacher-centred models where learner is a tabula rasa to be re-filled. Given that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964), “it is not enough to deliver old content in a new medium” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Lynch, 2002), but it is necessary to understand better the effects of the Internet on current learners' minds, and explore these new forms of learning and the ways to integrate them in formal and traditional education. Secondly, formal and informal learning do not exclude each other. Being in the middle of this transition, educators are challenged to rethink, redesign and redefine our culture about education, as well as the way learning is seen, done and organised in formal contexts, and to see teaching and learning as bidirectional, interchangeable processes.

The following section explains the nature of these changes in the Information Age more in depth and their implication for learning settings.

1.1.1. Social media and change of context in educational processes

Most Web 1.0 applications from the 1990s consisted of a repository, a delivery of broadcast content where information was transmitted and consumed passively, with more limited levels of interaction and with a top-down modality of information production. Web 1.0 was characterized by static and fixed webpages similar to print materials, and by applications like forums, email, chat, etc. In the meantime, new applications arose and began to involve a wider range of users, rather than a limited number of experts able to manage programming languages and net protocols. Therefore, gradually, a larger number

of users started familiarizing themselves with increasingly “user-friendly” systems, both more flexible and easily manageable, leading us to Web 2.0. Web 2.0 emphasised the idea of content creation. It overcame the limited barriers of interactivity of the past and retrieved the figure of “prosumers”. This term was originally coined by Toffler (1980) and applied to commercial environments to indicate that users are actively involved in the improvement and creation of goods and services in the marketplace. Then, the definition of “prosumers” was semantically extended to the technological environment and also included those users who are not merely consumers but produce information actively, and combine and remix content collaboratively (Tapscott & Williams, 2007). Web 2.0 started offering dynamic blogs and live materials like wikis and SNSs.

After this introductory distinction between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, it is imperative to clarify the terminology that will be employed in this thesis. In this dissertation, the expressions “social web” and “social media” will be used interchangeably and will replace the phrase “Web 2.0”, in line with Lamy and Zourou (2013). This choice is due to two main reasons: the first is that the expression “Web 2.0” is already becoming outdated given that the web is evolving fast and unpredictably, the second reason is because “Web 2.0” merely indicates the technical support where social media lie, (Zourou 2012; Lamy & Zourou 2013). As Lamy and Zourou (2013) point out, sharing Berners-Lee’s (2012) view, “the social web is a natural evolution for the web through time” (p.2).

The new possibilities provided by learning in the social web, by new user-friendly platforms and by different modalities of knowledge distribution are inevitably reshaping educational settings. In fact, social media applications have developed new collaborative dimensions where information is shared, created, remixed, constantly updated and improved by the users. As a consequence, learning environments in general are influenced by these new modalities of knowledge distribution, and teaching and learning are being reframed and are taking new shapes. To begin with, users’ habits suggest that in the learning domain the boundaries between learning providers and learners crumbled: learners entered the sphere of content production, which means that they could create their contents (learner generated content), “reuse” (Lamy & Zourou, 2013: 4) and share them in a connected intelligence process in which the individual has the feeling of belonging to a flexible community of learners without at the same time losing his autonomy (Antenos-Conforti, 2009; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007). In this process everyone’s

intelligence is interconnected to the others and people altogether collaborate and create knowledge (de Kerckhove, 1997).

The knowledge society requires adaptation to changing situations and ability to construct meanings, rather than mere acquisition of content. Not only is the content important but also the process of learning itself, that is the ways how learners acquire content, by constantly challenging the risk of information overload. The user of the “global village” has to learn how to become an active learner who makes a contribution to the creation of knowledge by inhabiting the web, by adopting his critical thinking in order to select, analyse, filter, share, comment, shape and reshape the huge amount of digital information and resources (Halvorsen, 2009). Under this perspective, learning environments are influenced by these new modalities of knowledge distribution and teaching and learning are being reframed and are taking new shapes.

The evolution of the web and its applications has been crucial for changes especially for L2 learning environments because it has determined a shift from information retrieval and rote trainings to learner autonomy and to the emergence of multiliteracies (Pegrum, 2009), tightly connected to the hypertextual content users generate in collaboration with other people. In other words, the current Internet scenario seems to meet the needs of language learners and enable them with all the opportunities to become active members of online environments. These needs include the contact with NSs, awareness of their learning process and a stimulating educational environment beyond the classroom setting. Revolving around a learner-centred approach that confers great autonomy to learners, this scenario mirrors European Union current policies for lifelong learning.

1.1.2. Lifelong L2 learners in online communities

In 2010 the president of the European Union, Barroso, introduced *Europe 2020*, a strategy whose important goals are to achieve a European Knowledge Area and to ensure easier circulation of all citizens, knowledge and technology, so that students and professionals gain experience by studying and living abroad and strengthen their European identity. At the core of this strategy there is the adoption of an adequate lifelong learning policy in the framework of the digital economy. To this regard, the European Framework for key Competences for Lifelong Learning (European Parliament and the Council, 2006) identified a set of key-competences required for lifelong learning. Among the eight

competences the framework lists, four in particular are strictly related to this thesis and can be overlapped and interlocked. They are: (1) communication in the mother tongue, (2) communication in foreign languages, (3) digital competence, (4) learning to learn.¹

Very broadly, this thesis deals with the learner's gradual process of interlanguage from (1) the L1 to (2) the L2 in the social context of (3) online communities and social media, (4) while reflecting on his/her own L2 learning process and on his/her personal style of learning.

Within the network society, rather than being a commodity to be transmitted (Ala-Mutka, 2010), learning is seen as an experience that the individual builds actively within a community (Ackermann, 2004). According to Siemens (2006) in an era where learning and technology work in synergy, the network itself is at the bases of the process of learning. Learners continuously update their knowledge and build their resources by making use of and strengthening connections (Ala-Mutka, 2010). In this sense, online communities seem to be a fertile environment for the aforementioned key-competences to take root and for new forms of collaboration, communication, activities and learning opportunities in the L2 (Alm, 2006).

Online communities and networks considerably favour social knowledge construction processes, they allow L2 learners to play different roles, to perform their identities, to explore new perspectives and sharing their views overcoming the limits of space and time. Mainly for this reason, online communities are considered as the most representative example of the current shift from formal to informal educational modes of learning, and seem to retrieve and enhance experiential learning models in which L2 learners discover the language autonomously by first-hand experience (Ala-Mutka, 2010)

Experiential learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984:41). In the model of experiential learning, learning is a four-stage cycle consisting of “concrete experience”, “abstract conceptualization”, “active experimentation” and “reflective observation”. Basically, in Kolb's view of learn-

¹ The other four competences are: mathematical competences and basic competences in science and technology, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship and cultural awareness (L394/14).

ing, concrete experience triggers reflection, which, in turn, leads to the creation of new concepts and models. These models are then tested in concrete situations and give rise to new experience (Kolb, 1984). Resembling experiential modalities of learning, novices turn into experts and create new practices within the community through shared resource and mutual engagement. Their simple participation becomes a moment of creation and transformation (Rogoff, Paradise, Mejía Arauz, Correa-Chávez & Angelillo, 2003). Following the model of experiential learning and applying it to the field of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), Arnold and Paulus (2010) set up courses where students firstly experienced directly online community as well as a wide range of technological tools for CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) as L2 learners and then reflected on this experience in the TL. They found out that the use of a SNS, *Ning*, fostered community building and that, despite some criticism, students saw educational potential in chats and SCMC.

As it can be deduced, in online communities learners can experience new forms of learning that go beyond traditional classrooms and of which they are not always aware. These forms of learning are named in several ways, such as invisible learning (Cobo & Moravec, 2011) or informal learning (Cross, 2007). While formal learning takes place in a classroom and is mainly intentional, informal learning includes unintentional and unexpected learning and is related to exploring and community building/belonging, which are both connected to the individual autonomy in a relaxing and at the same time teaming context. In a certain way, informal learning is close to some elements present in traditional settings to support formal education, such as tutorship, coaching, computer enhanced training, etc. In fact, informal learning includes helping others, giving them feedback, nurturing what has already been learned, reflecting on one's learning process (Cross, 2007). "Informal and incidental learning take place wherever people have the need, motivation and opportunity for learning" (Marsick & Watkins, 2001:28), and is unstructured, influenced by chance and serendipity, inductive and linked to other people (Marsick & Volpe, 1999), all conditions that the network society, and online communities in particular, provide.

In this sense, it would be possible to argue that current learners are informal learners most of the time, who learn from their everyday lives, in a variety of ways and not only

in formal, structured contexts, accomplishing the European objective of Lifelong Learning.

This research, in particular, focuses on online communities designed for L2 learning, favouring the sense of community and fostering new opportunities for a motivating and collaborative informal L2 learning process, and the rise of new blurred models of L2 teaching and learning, which are not unidirectional. The online communities selected for this study are *Livemocha* and *Busuu* (see chapter 3, section 3.1.2). These environments designed for a potential language improvement and based on the social web raise some questions about the use that online users make of its tools and the behaviours enacted when inhabiting the communities. In particular, the study looks at learners' construction of opportunities for L2 use in these language learning communities.

The following section discusses the concepts of formal, informal and non-formal learning contexts with a specific focus on European policies for lifelong learning. These terms will be mentioned several times in this thesis and will be related to online communities. For this reason, a clear definition of all of them is necessary.

1.1.3. Formal, non-formal, informal lifelong L2 learning

Scholars, policy makers, practitioners and experts in the learning field have been discussing the definitions of formal, non-formal and informal learning for years, trying to clarify and increase understanding of the key-issues of these three concepts. Nevertheless, an agreed, exhaustive set of definitions is still lacking among researchers².

As La Belle (1982) explains, the distinction between formal/non-formal dates back to the 1960s when, in order to supply the new, different needs of education outside of the institutions, the expression non-formal education was introduced. In particular, this concept acknowledged the importance of learning and teaching in a community of people. Later in the 1970s, non-formal education tended to be associated with the Third World and to some educational programmes addressed to a growing population poorly served by schools and western educational institutions. Instead, in the more industrialized coun-

² The lack of agreement also concerns the exact spelling of one of these terms. In the literature, for instance, it is usual to find the following forms conveying the same meaning: non formal, nonformal, non-formal. In this thesis, for a matter of consistency, I have decided to make use of the form "non-formal", since it is the most frequently form employed so far. However, original spelling will be preserved in quotations.

tries, non-formal education provided a more flexible supplement to schools for social and individual development and job training as well.

Using a different terminology, Resnick (1987) differentiated sharply between “school learning” and “other learning” concerning everything that is out of school. Similarly, but with a more precise terminology, other authors distinguish between formal learning environments, which are highly structured and informal learning environments, which are less structured and are focused on the figure of the learner (Gerber, Marek & Cavallo, 2001). However, as other scholars have pointed out, both these views are limited because they only take into account the physical setting where learning takes place, ignoring a number of interacting factors such as learners’ sociability, beliefs, attitudes and cultural background (Dierking, 1991; Eshach, 2007). In other words, out of school learning and informal learning would be interchangeable expressions not able to cover all the possible situations. A trip to a science museum, for instance, can assume different connotations for a classroom whether there is a very structured programme and a teacher stimulating the activity (formal learning) or whether students’ visit is free unstructured and unguided (informal learning), (Eshach, 2007; Gilbert & Priest, 1997).

The lack of a clear agreement in the literature basically consists in determining whether informal is the opposite and in contrast to formal learning, whether formal learning could be included in informal learning since it can also take place within informal settings and whether informal can occur when linked to formal (Hofstein & Rosenfeld, 1996).

Another source of difficulty is the terminology in use, as the expression “non-formal” is often used as the broad category opposed to “formal” in place of “informal”. In other cases, instead, “non-formal” is used as a condition in between. Eraut (2000), for example, introduced the term “non-formal” trying to define it by what it is not (formal) showing a stronger preference for the term “non-formal” rather than “informal” because the latter, involving a huge variety of situations, behaviours, discourses cannot describe precisely learning per se. Therefore, in the broad and indefinite category of non-formal learning fit all those situations in which there is *not* a structured learning framework, an organised learning situation, credits or qualifications, the presence of the teacher, nor outcomes and objectives set by an external member.

On the contrary, with out of school/informal learning being too broad and undefined a category, Eshach (2007) urges for the definition of an intermediate state, non-formal learning, which involves an out of school institution, is structured, usually prearranged and voluntary, can be guided, is usually not sequential and not evaluated. Most of all, according to the author, non-formal learning appeals to emotional, personal and affective aspects and promotes a wide range of intelligences (interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, kinaesthetic, spatial, logical-mathematical, linguistic) and different cognitive learning styles (Gardner, 1993). Eshach's study makes a step further in the understanding of these concepts not only because it attempts to bridge in-school and out-of school learning by the creation of the intermediate category of non-formal learning, but also because it introduces in non-formal learning the cognitive and affective aspects and the perspectives of the learner, the teacher and the institutional staff. These relevant aspects were not usually mentioned in the previous literature when referring to non-formal learning and currently start being taken into account.

Coombs and Ahmed (1974) are the forerunners of the most common current definitions provided by the European Union. After renovating the old terminology by replacing "education" with "learning", and distinguishing among formal, non-formal and informal, they emphasized the lifelong learning aspect, which today is at the basis of the European educational policies. In this framework, the *formal* type of learning is the "institutionalised, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured educational system, spanning lower primary school and the upper reaches of the university". *Non-formal* learning is defined as "any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal environment to provide selected types of learning to particular sub-groups in the population, adults as well as children". *Informal* learning is "the lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment" (p.8). From their distinction, it emerges that the difference between formal and non-formal is that the latter does not have to be necessarily sponsored by the government and the difference between non-formal and informal is that the former is instructional and programmatic (La Belle, 1981, 1982).

However, despite its modern approach and its focus on lifelong learning, this model considers these three educational types as “discrete entities” (La Belle, 1981: 162) often addressed to a specific segment of people (as in the case of non-formal learning addressing to particular subgroups). To this model, La Belle opposes his own view, which takes into account the simultaneity and the interrelationship among these three “predominant modes of learning” (p.162). In this interactive model all individuals can be constantly engaged in all three forms of learning. In the formal environment of the classroom, for example, beyond the curricular activities (formal), there are extra-curricular activities (non-formal), the classroom’s organizational rules and the shared knowledge among peers (informal) as well.

In contrast with Eraut and in line with Coombs and Ahmed and La Belle, the European Commission (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004), instead of replacing “informal” with “non-formal”, sees the “non-formal” as an intermediate condition, in a continuum with less sharp borders. When defining “non-formal” learning, the EU combines part of Eraut’s definition of formal (a prescribed framework and a structured learning event) with part of the non-formal (no certification, no educational institution). The EU contributed to the classification also by the significant introduction of the learner’s perspective and its intentionality, two important aspects in line with the new models of learning that place learners in the foreground.

The EU’s latest definitions are based on the terminology provided by the Cedefop (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) in 2008. The definitions are as follows:

(a) Formal Learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment (e.g. in an education or training institution or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view. It typically leads to validation and certification.

(b) Non-formal Learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view.

Comments:

- non-formal learning outcomes may be validated and lead to certification;
- non-formal learning is sometimes described as semi-structured learning.

(c) Informal Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective.

Comments:

- informal learning outcomes do not usually lead to certification but may be validated and certified in the framework of recognition of prior learning schemes;
- informal learning is also referred to as experiential or incidental/random learning.

(CEDEFOP, 2008)

Another attempt to outline key-features for these three concepts in the institutional field has been made by Werquin (2007), who compared the definitions of the UNESCO for the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), of the European Commission, of the Statistical Office of the European Communities (EUROSTAT) and of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Despite fuzzy and overlapping borders between formal, non-formal, and informal, he found some consistency in the opposition formal/informal. But the definition of non-formal, which is an in-between, intermediate condition, remained uncertain.

According to Werquin, there is consensus on the fact that formal learning has *learning objectives*, is *organised*, and is *intentional*, while informal learning has *no learning objectives*, is *not organised* and is mostly *unintentional*. But, for what concerns non-formal learning, there is no unanimity about the three aforementioned criteria, that is, *organization*, *learning objectives* and *intentionality*.

Changing scenario, Livingstone's (2001) vision of the issue draws upon the North American educational background. Livingstone's discerning principle is the teacher/learner relationship and his categories are four. Firstly, he replaces the word "learning" with the term "education" in the first three categories and then he associates (1) *formal education* to the figure of a teacher who has the authority to determine how to learn a given "body of knowledge" (p.2) in a given school system. In the case of (2) *non-*

formal education (also called further education), there is still an organised curriculum but learners decide to study voluntarily with a teacher. He reports as examples workshops and adult courses but a university student, who is an adult and most of the times decides voluntarily to enrol in a university course, would fit in this framework as well. Finally, he distinguishes between (3) *informal education* (or training) and (4) *informal learning*. The former occurs when teachers/mentors, for example, guide others in the acquisition of job skills, that is, according to an “organised body of knowledge” (p.2) but in more spontaneous ways. The latter is identified with any activity involving the acquisition of some knowledge or skills and in the absence of externally imposed criteria of educational institutions. Nevertheless, this categorization seems not to embrace all the situations and creates some problems. Firstly, too sharp boundaries are set when formal education is considered as something compulsory related to schools and young people, while all the other forms of learning are seen as voluntary and connected to adults’ formation. In this way, the category of formal education assumes almost a negative connotation. Secondly, similarly to Eraut but unlike the European Commission, in the fourth category of informal learning, the intentionality factor, that is, the fact that in many cases learners learn without being aware of it, is not taken into account.

Similarly to Eraut, but presenting a different argument, Beckett and Hager (2002) do not talk about non-formal learning and mention only formal and informal learning, referring in particular to the workplace context. They maintain that traditional learning is based on a Cartesian paradigm that splits body and mind conferring a dominant position to the second. As a consequence, standard, formal learning resides in individual minds, is mostly expressed in a written form, is de-contextualised, learners are passive and stimulated by the teachers. Rather, they see learning as an organic, holistic whole; something engaging the person as a complete individual (emotions, values, etc.) in relation to a given context; this type of learning is based on practice, it is often collaborative, it is driven by learners and it is activity-based. All those elements fitting into this group go under the name of informal learning, as opposed to the standard, formal, traditional learning. In this way, not only has the antithetical Cartesian dualism reduced such a complex issue to two opposite categories, but also formal learning has been charged of a too negative connotation, similarly to Livingstone’s description.

As this general overview shows, the issue at stake when talking about formal, non-formal, informal is still unsolved because it has to be related to specific contexts (social, political, economic) and to the specific purposes that the writer has in mind, such as lifelong learning policies, adult education, workplace issues (Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm, 2002). It emerges that between the extremes formal/non-formal/informal a wide range of different learning conditions, procedures and outcomes is possible and that the boundaries of these learning forms are not sharp. Therefore, because of the blurred boundaries existing among these three dimensions, rather than trying to provide an exact definition for each category, it would be more advisable to explore their interdependency, how these dimensions can be combined and interrelated with each other (Bjørnåvold, 2000), especially if we consider that often it is formal learning that triggers non-formal and informal learning.

Considering the current lack of clarity in the academic field, for the purposes of this dissertation, I will rely on one of the most recent definitions of formal, non-formal, informal learning, the one given by the European Commission (Cedefop, 2008). In this way, given the linguistic focus of this thesis, revolving around informal and non-formal learning environments, I will consider the acquisition of an L2 within this framework, drawing on the correspondence made by Eaton (2010) among (a) formal learning of languages, (b) non-formal learning of languages and (c) informal learning of languages, as described below:

(a) formal learning of languages

In line with the aforementioned definition of formal learning provided by the European Commission, according to Eaton, formal L2 learning corresponds to students learning a language in schools and universities, in an organized way and on the basis of a curriculum. This type of learning is led by professional teachers who assess students at regular intervals (written, oral and aural) and give them a final evaluation. This form of language learning is considered credible and held in high regard. Moreover, despite the more communicative teaching and learning methods used today, it emphasizes the written form of language because it is focused on grammar and structures.

(b) non-formal learning of languages

Eaton mentions three examples to show the engagement in non-formal language learning: (1) the case of a child taking a heritage language course belonging to a cultural group for a few hours a week; (2) the second case to fit in the category is a university student who travels during the summer to take language classes and to have an immersion experience in the place where the language is spoken. (3) The third example refers to an adult taking a non-credit evening course in an L2. This type of learning can be formally or loosely organized, is held by organizations, institutions, private language schools and is not necessarily held by someone who has a formal training as educator. Maybe for this reason, it is considered less trustworthy.

(c) informal learning of languages

In reference to informal language learning, Eaton reports three other examples: (1) A child learning his L1 in the informal setting of the home from his mother and exposed to the whole environment surrounding him; (2) the second case is unintentional as well and concerns a young person going on a backpacking holiday engaging in social situations with NSs of other languages in a hostel, and learning the colloquial expressions of everyday life. He has the opportunity to learn without being totally aware of it; (3) finally, the example of intentional informal language learning regards an adult on holidays taking a walking tour in a city conducted in the language spoken in that place for the purpose of learning some of the language. This form of language learning can happen at any time and in any place, it is the most spontaneous and it is mainly unintentional. It is led especially by NSs of the language, engaging in everyday conversation. The language learnt in these contexts is the authentic, spontaneous language with a specific focus on the speaking production and interaction skills rather than writing skills, typical of formal textbooks. This way to learn a language is often overlooked and not regarded as valid but it is essential for language learners' development because of its authenticity and immersion in spontaneous contexts.

To this regard, it is extremely complex to confine online communities for L2 learning to one of these specific domains. Firstly, this is because the realms of formal, non-formal and informal are too complex, multidimensional and overlapping for themselves, and secondly because in these online communities different elements belonging to all these domains seem to coexist. On the one hand, the lessons are somewhat structured, organized, evaluated and lead to a certification (even though this certification is informal and is

not recognised by formal institutions). Despite not being recognised by an official institution, the communities resemble the modalities and the procedures of formal or non-formal learning. In contrast, the openness of the interaction and the spontaneous conversations occurring among learners mirror the online spontaneous conversations typical of informal contexts.

Traditionally scholars have questioned the value of informal L2 learning because it does not involve grammar, structures and textbooks, but on the contrary it “corrupts the purity” of language learners’ vocabulary with jargon and slang words. One of the first to challenge this vision of formal L2 learning as the only sociocultural accepted norm were Scribner and Cole (1973), who claimed that the majority of things in life are learnt more effectively through informal processes, citing language learning as an example. Another point was made by Krashen (1976), who examined the distinction informal/formal within the context of *The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis* included in his *Monitor Theory* (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985). To begin with, Krashen maintained that acquisition and learning are two separate ways of gaining knowledge. Moreover, once gained, these two types of knowledge are stored separately. *Acquisition* takes place naturally and spontaneously, without the learner being aware of it, while he is involved in the L2 interaction. The focus is on meaning and there is neither instruction nor intentionality to learn. Similarly to first language acquisition processes, SLA (Second Language Acquisition) occurs when the learner makes a spontaneous use of the language and draws on his acquired unconscious knowledge without following pre-structured rules. *Learning*, on the other hand, is about gaining explicit knowledge of the language’s rules and patterns. In this case the L2 is the object of instruction and the learner intentionally and consciously makes efforts to gain this knowledge. The Monitor Theory is a *non-interface* model because these two compartments of knowledge, the acquired system and the learned system can never interact. In other words, if learners *formally* study the grammar rules, they will not be able to employ this L2 knowledge in spontaneous contexts of communication because it has not been acquired (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985).

Relying on the aforementioned Hypothesis, Krashen presented evidence of how informal and formal environments (he did not consider the intermediate category) contribute to different aspects of L2 competence, the former affecting acquired competence and the latter affecting learned competence. However, one can argue against this view for

two main reasons: firstly, because such sharp opposition formal/informal is clearly out-of-date because of the merging boundaries I have outlined so far; secondly, because the non interaction between learned competence and acquired competence do not match with the simultaneous and multidimensional vision of complex interdependency of formal/non-formal and informal L2 learning.

The situation today is changing and the policy promoted by the European Union emphasizes the value of community-based learning, lifelong learning (throughout one's lifespan), lifewide learning. The latter, in particular, is a tripartite concept covering formal, non-formal and informal learning and regarding them as synergic and co-operating dimensions (Skolverket, 2000). To complete the scenario, in its report, Delors (1996) mentions another key-skill that knowledge society's learners should acquire to complete their development as complete individuals. This skill is about learning to be, learning to do, learning to work and learning to learn, which is strictly connected to their everyday life formal, non-formal and informal experiences.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)³, funded by the Council of Europe (2001), is oriented towards these new directions: its philosophical underpinning is lifelong language learning and the idea that learning a language is not simply about grammar and formal accuracy, but also involves skills related to non-formal and informal learning contexts, recognized as valuable as formal ones. In this sense, the language portfolio of the CEFR through the self-assessment grid offers learners a way to reflect and record their language skills throughout all their lifespan, regardless of where and how these skills have been acquired (Council of Europe, 2001). As Little (2006) remarked, the scales and levels of the CEFR are multidimensional, include linguistic and strategic competence but also a "behavioural dimension" (p.174), which implies learners' maturity and autonomy when reading these scales and relating them to his/her learning progress independently of whether s/he is learning in in-class or in out-of-class settings.

In this general scenario of constant change, learning environments are facing a process of continuous experimentation and exploration of new opportunities for language learning. The fact that many governments are committed in developing more personalised education systems and a more learner-centred perspective (Selwyn, 2007a, 2007b) and

³ Council of Europe, (2001). Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). Retrieved from: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf

that the European Union has started supporting particular studies and/or projects oriented to ICT education and language learning is a further confirmation of the importance of these issues related to informal learning and lifelong learning. The European Union started to be more intensively involved in the promotion of multilingualism in Europe since 2001, which was declared the European Year of languages. The objective of the campaign was to raise awareness of the rich cultural heritage of the continent deriving from its mosaic of different languages, independently of how many NSs a language has and whether or not it is widely used by non-native speakers (NNSs)⁴. Among the meaningful initiatives undertaken by the European institution it is possible to mention *Lingo*, a pilot case study on motivation in the L2 and its enhancement through informal contexts; *Lingua D Project*, to promote both face-to-face and online tandem language learning among schools, students and institutions all over Europe; *eTwinning*, to encourage all the schools in Europe to form a collaborative partnership through different types of communication technology and under the perspective of acquiring a European, multilingual citizenship; *ELVIN* (European Languages Virtual Network) which aimed at creating a social network called *MyEhvin* to support L2 learning among university students studying for a career in public administration by combining formal and informal activities; the *eTandem*, a platform developed by the Ruhr University to help learners find distant language partners and to offer assistance and suggestions for finding a partner and for communicating efficiently through different media. It also includes tips for teachers when integrating tandem activities in their language class; *SpeakApps* (<http://www.speakapps.eu>), a project funded by the LLP (Lifelong Learning Programme) that aims to practice speaking skills by means of a LMS (Learning Management System), *Moodle*, an online community, *Mahara* (<https://mahara.org/>), Open Educational Resources (*OER*) and tools for oral production (*Langblog*) and speaking interactions (*Tandem* and *Videochat*). In relation to the *SpeakApps* project, see Chapter 5 section 5.2.1. To conclude, there are two recent initiatives in the field of telecollaboration: (1) the Erasmus Multilateral Project *INTENT* (*Integrating Telecollaborative Networks into Foreign Language Higher Education*), which aims to raise greater awareness of telecollaboration among students, teachers and decision makers; (2) and the *TILA* project (*telecollaboration, intercultural language acquisition*) funded by the LLP, aiming to foster telecollaborative activities in secondary schools across Europe and to empower teachers.

⁴ European Year of Languages 2001: Some Highlights. Report by the European Commission, 2001.

The following section enters the core of the literature review and focuses on L2 learning practices in association with SNSs and online communities more specifically, addressing the main theories and concepts to approach these environments as well as the main practices so far known.

1.2. SNSs and online communities for L2 learning

One of the most common definitions of “social network” in sociolinguistics is offered by Milroy (1987), who defines social networks as “the informal social relationships contracted by an individual” (p.178). Previous research in offline social networks delineated that the network concept has proven to be a powerful analytical tool for a better understanding of the dynamics of L2 learning and it stressed the positive features of informal social networks in terms of L2 learning (Kurata, 2011; Savignon, 1997; van Lier, 1996). Among the possible benefits of informal social networks and out-of-class spontaneous interactions in the TL in naturalistic contexts there is the enhancement of learners’ self-confidence, of their level of engagement in the use of the TL and of their interest towards the TL and culture (Archangeli, 1999; Kurata, 2011). In out-of-class contexts, it was found that if learners are able to create their personal social networks, they can at the same time create opportunities to practice the TL (Kurata, 2011). The construction of this experience is dependent on the sociocultural context surrounding learners and on their identity (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton & Gao, 2008; Norton & Toohey, 2001). In this regard, research in the field raised important insights about the spontaneous use of the L2 in informal offline social settings and showed that many factors come into play, such as learner identity as an adequate user of the L2, learner perception of his/her role during the conversation, and the linguistic norms of the community where the learner is situated (Kurata, 2011, 2014).

In recent years, with the spread of the Internet and social media, the term “network” has been widened to the sphere of the online communities, web-forums, online chats and SNSs in particular, raising even more interest among L2 researchers. From 1997, when *SixDegrees*⁵ was founded, until the present time, SNSs have had a strong appeal to researchers, who have studied aspects of SNSs such as impression management, friendship performance, privacy issues, the possibility of building relationships and network struc-

⁵ This SNS lasted from 1997 to 2001. The link to the SNS was: <http://sixdegrees.com/>

ture (boyd⁶, 2007; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2007; Lewis, Kaufman & Christakis, 2008). SNSs are defined as:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

(boyd & Ellison, 2007: 210)

Within the context of the network society, SNSs can be considered as spontaneous contexts with some potentialities for informal learning to take root because they are open to participation and learner self-control (Mazman & Usluel, 2009; Pettenati & Cigognini, 2007) and allow people to share information and interact with one another in a dynamic environment of flexible interconnections. These interconnections taking place in SNSs provide a social context for using the TL and allow current L2 learners to come into contact with NSs anywhere in the world easily, without necessarily overcoming national boundaries like in the past.

SNSs are deemed to be able to engage the sense of community, a feeling of belonging, which seems to be the factor that mostly triggers motivation to be a member of a social community (Pettenati & Ranieri, 2006). Sense of community and inter-personal relationships are considered as necessary in educational experience because they would have the potential to favour the construction of knowledge and the transformative potential to rethink and redefine the learning experience in a community of inquiry (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). However, despite researchers' optimism about SNSs and their potentialities, when investigating the role they play for learning, it is important to distinguish between their affordances and what SNSs would allow learners to do, and if there is concrete evidence of their potentialities and realization of them, if learners are able and willing to get the most out of these communities and if a positive learning experience is actually occurring. Researchers are tackling these issues but they are still far from certainties.

⁶ danah boyd's name and surname are spelled in lowercase in all her publications; therefore, here I decided to retain this form of spelling.

In general, interest about SNSs has tended to revolve around the use by educators of SNS in their pedagogic practise (Hewitt & Forte, 2006; Mason, 2006; Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds, 2007), related issues of trust and privacy (Acquisti & Gross, 2005; Gross & Acquisti, 2006), and students' informal educational use of SNSs that is, their post-class use of the SNS for discussing in an informal way their learning experience, exchanging logistical information, sharing suggestions and offering moral support (Ellison, et al., 2007; Lampe, et al., 2007; Selwyn, 2007a, 2007b; Selwyn, 2009). Researchers who have looked generally at SNSs in education in have found some evidence of idea sharing, critical thinking and peer-feedback (Selwyn, 2007a, 2007b). It has been argued that SNSs are meeting learners' needs of learning by doing, given that on these platforms learners collaboratively negotiate meaning, learn critical literacy skills to manage, analyse, evaluate and prioritize a huge quantity of data, turning information into understanding (Pegrum, 2009). Researchers in general agree on the fact that SNSs have a positive effect on formal learning contexts; it has been demonstrated, for example, that *Facebook* (<https://www.facebook.com/>) has a considerable influence on student engagement and classroom climate (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty, 2010). Moreover, SNSs have proved to be environments where learners' reputation and social capital are at stake because they are aware of being visible and perform their identities at their most. Further research has revealed that learning on social networks means participation in social practices, acquisition of habits, attitudes, skills (Mayes & Freitas, 2007).

Other researchers, on the other hand, have also stressed negative aspects related to SNSs. Ellis & Abreu-Ellis (2014) for instance, analyzed the perceptions of graduate and undergraduate students on the use of *Facebook* as a learning tool. Their findings suggested that students used this SNS primarily for social use, but that they were hesitant to use it in the academic environment because of privacy issues and also because they did not recognize *Facebook* as a valuable tool in establishing social presence during their learning. Similar findings were reported by other authors (Hitosugi, 2011; Mitchell, 2012). Mitchell, for instance, found that students did not feel confident at using the TL in SNSs, they were reluctant to share their own generated content online and resisted mixing language learning practices with socializing on SNSs. According to several studies investigating learners' perceptions (Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin, 2010; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011), not all learners are willing to use SNSs for language learning because of the informality of SNSs and because of spelling mistakes that inevitably are made when

using them (Mitchell, 2012). In his insightful study about training L2 learners to use *Facebook* in a CALL-based English course at a Japanese University, Prichard (2013) found that in the *Facebook* group he created for his English course, there was very little negotiation of meaning and learning practice. Even though the training on using *Facebook* safely effectively proved to work well, it seems that students preferred socializing among them and building social capital. Moreover, since the study was conducted in the sheltered environment of the *Facebook* classroom, no information was available about the informal spontaneous interactions between students and other English speaking users of the SNS.

Apart from these considerations, the conclusion that can be drawn is that in virtual communities and platforms reproducing the social qualities of SNSs there is some potential for students to learn from informal communication and interactions. It has been suggested that informal activities in SNSs may allow the opportunity to re-engage learners with formal education and learning promoting in learners critical thinking about their learning process (Bugeja, 2006), which is one of the main issues at stake in formal education. In this sense, SNSs have been considered to offer the capacity to change the traditional educational system and to better motivate students as actively engaged learners (Ziegler, 2007). McLoughlin and Lee (2008) maintain that social networks are pedagogical tools for discovery, sharing, content creation, knowledge building and spontaneous learning opportunities. In addition, SNSs have been attributed the potentialities to support collaborative learning, engage individuals in critical thinking, enhance communication and writing skills through activating members' work in personalized environments (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008; Lockyer & Patterson, 2008). SNSs are considered as environments where students can expand their learning and accomplish their needs of interaction and socio-experiential learning (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007). Nevertheless, the research in the field is still too anchored to the realm of potentialities and opportunities. More mature advancements in the field should assess whether SNSs affordances and potentialities can actually be realized and if learners and teachers are aware, are willing and know how to take advantage of these environments. This is the gap in the area that the present thesis is, in part, trying to address.

The realm of SNSs applied to L2 learning represents a potentially fertile ground for L2 learning to take root. Learners now have many more opportunities of exposure to the TL outside of the physical settings of the classroom for example. The interconnections

taking place on SNSs provide a “real” social context for using the TL in asynchronous (private messages, videoblogs), synchronous (video and textual chats) and hybrid synchronous/asynchronous ways (wall posts), and allow L2 learners to come into contact with NSs easily. Students have the possibility to negotiate meaning in the TL and put into intercultural contact their L1 and L2 worlds (Blake, 2009; Kramsch, 2000). Furthermore, the online environment in itself, merging informal, formal and non-formal practices, generates new dynamics in the learning experience, which adds even more complexity to the scenario. The following sections, drawing on the existing state of the art, will show that most of the studies in L2 learning practices in online communities have been conducted in formal settings but also that they are inevitably mingled with the non-formal and informal conditions that are intrinsic features of these online environments. Consequently, the traditional teachers/students distinction has become greyed and somewhat confusing, leading teachers to reconsider their authority in the informal and non-formal settings of a SNS. In informal L2 learning on SNS, on the other hand, where the institutional teacher is absent and learners are self-driven, the SNS system itself put learners in the condition of becoming teachers and being novices and experts at the same time. More in detail, in the transcultural⁷ environment of SNS the role of expert and novice is not static and is negotiated and redefined by the online interaction, because each learner shares his own world, background and linguistic expertise (Reinhardt & Zander, 2011). The new dynamics that I mentioned before also regard the blurred boundaries between oral and written genres generated by the online interactions (Blake, 2009). The flowing text of online chats poses new challenges to L2 learners and the notion of “text” itself has become ambiguous (Mills, 2011), L2 students have to face the remixing and hybridization of text and media and multimodal literacy, that is, multiple synthesized forms of communication (Thorne, Black & Sykes, 2009).

In this thesis, when I mention “SNSs” I refer to SNSs like *Facebook*, *Orkut*⁸ and *MySpace* (<https://myspace.com>). Instead when I mention “online communities for L2 learning” I refer mainly to those SNSs designed specifically for L2 learning, such as *Livemocha* (<https://learn.livemocha.com/>), *Busuu* (<https://www.busuu.com/>), *Palabea*⁹, *Italki* (<https://www.italki.com/>) and *Babbel* (<https://www.babbel.com/>). These communities

⁷ Reinhardt and Zander (2011:340) specify that the term “transcultural” refers to the integration of more than one culture at the same time. The word transcends “cross-cultural” (one or another culture at one time) and “intercultural” (between two cultures).

⁸ This SNS was closed but its archives are still available at the following link: <https://orkut.google.com/>

⁹ This SNS was closed. His link was <http://www.palabea.com/>

can be considered as SNSs, since they resemble mainstream SNSs such as *Facebook*, *Orkut* and *MySpace* under the visualisation and layout aspect (graphic interface, asynchronous and synchronous communication, personal profile, friend search) but they also introduce as a main feature the educational aspect of L2 learning courses, organized into units, paced lessons and language learning materials. Zourou (2012) defines SNSs like *Livemocha* and *Busuu* as “web 2.0 language learning communities” (p.4), in order to distinguish between spaces where learners interact in learning environments designed for this specific purpose, and other spaces such as *Facebook* and *Ning* where teachers created specific groups to initiate L2 telecollaboration practices. Other authors (Gruba & Clark, 2013; Harrison, 2013; Lin, 2012; Liu et al., 2013, 2015) have employed the term SNSLL (Social Networking Sites for Language Learning) to stress the affinities with the above popular and general SNSs. In the context of this thesis, I preferred the expression “online community” not only because it is the one most frequently used in the literature, but also because I find it opportune to make an important distinction between a community like *Livemocha* and a SNS like *Facebook*. The former corresponds to a social “networking” site, while the latter mainly corresponds to a social “network” site. By the term “networking” (boyd & Ellison, 2007:211), researchers mean relationship initiation between people who do not know each other, in similar ways to other forms of CMC. Instead, the peculiarity of a social “network” site like *Facebook*, is that users display their network connections and communicate with people who are often already part of their offline social network or are “latent ties” (boyd & Ellison, 2007:211; Haythornthwaite, 2002, 2005).

Even though in this thesis I will refer to these platforms as to “online communities”, an important premise about this terminology should be made. The term “community” is ambiguous and inappropriate to describe these spaces because the term “community” implies interdependence, members’ engagement, a specific social organization, the presence of a micro-culture, longevity, the selection of its members (Dillenbourg, Poirer & Carles, 2003), a significant history, a shared cosmology, common cultural and historical roots (Barab & Duffy, 2000). Being a member of one of these communities for L2 learning may not necessarily entail that learners are highly engaged and involved in its activities. More investigation is needed to assess if and to what extent the online communities object of the present study possess the aforementioned features that define a community.

In addition, part of the literature (Gonzales, 2012) also looked at *Livemocha* as a “Community of Practice” (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which is an interactive, extended community where situated learning occurs. Wenger (1998a, 1998b; 2004) defines a CoP as a group of people who share the same problems, passions, and interests for something and that interact regularly in order to learn better and improve in these activities. Wenger’s (1998b) social theory assumes that learners are social beings and that learning has to occur in a context of social participation. Learning occurs twice; first socially through taking part in the practices of a community, then individually through meta-reflection. According to Wenger (2006), there are three crucial elements distinguishing a CoP from other communities; (a) a domain of shared interest where (b) members interact regularly, build relationships and (c) share practice addressing problems and learning together. Whether this is actually occurring in online communities for L2 learning is an issue that still deserves more investigation.

The definition of CoP has recently become even more complex and fascinating with the interplay between communities and technologies (Wenger, 2006; Wenger, White & Smith, 2009). Wenger (2006) underlines that the school is not the privileged place for learning because most of the time it is a self-contained closed world. In order to serve lifelong learning needs of students, formal educational settings and communities should extend learning events to the outside world. The social web would be a powerful aid in this sense, since it would multiply the possibilities to create communities of practice and would trigger the formation of new ones beyond the geographical limitations of traditional CoPs (Wenger, 2006; Wenger et al., 2009). The union of technology and community is defined by the authors as “technology stewarding” (2009:24) to indicate that it is considered as both a perspective and a practice. Moreover, several studies echoing Vygotsky (1978) stressed the idea that the collaborative knowledge generated within a virtual community is higher than individual knowledge and that virtual CoPs have a potential for negotiation of meaning in the L2, enhance learners’ interactions and create a rich environment for language learning (Hellermann 2008; Johnson, 2001; Long & Robinson, 1998).

But scholars do not always agree on the association network/CoP. For instance, according to Wenger (1998a), CoPs are considered as different from networks because they are

beyond the intertwinement of relations among its members. All these members are involved collectively in a learning practice. It is hard to conceive a full identification between CoPs and an online network/community to promote L2 learning.

Given that a common agreement has not been reached on terms such as “network”, “community” and on their possible identification with a CoP, great part of the existing literature (Chotel, 2012; Chotel & Mangenot, 2011; Zourou, 2012) decided to interpret the term “community” in a less literal sense when referring to environments such as *Livemocha* and *Busuu*, considering a community as a group of individuals and the proximity among these individuals as the peculiar trait of a community. In this thesis, I will follow the same consideration when analysing learners’ (considered as individuals) activities and behaviours in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* communities.

The landscape is a complex one and it is not easy to map out. As a consequence, for the literature review I will focus on three different levels: (1) Telecollaboration practices in L2 learning (1.2.1), (2) L2 learning practices in SNSs (1.2.2) and (3) L2 learning studies (quantitative, descriptive and qualitative studies) that have been conducted in online communities for L2 learning (1.2.3). The present research, being an ethnographic study conducted on two online communities for L2 learning (*Busuu* and *Livemocha*), and dealing with informal interactions between learners, which is an issue tightly connected to previous telecollaboration practices mentioned in the literature, belongs to the first and the third category. At the same time, I will attempt to distinguish more clearly between the affordances, and potential for L2 learning on the one hand, and whether this potential is actually realized, which is one of the main issues this study explores.

1.2.1. Telecollaboration practices in L2 learning

Online environments have been considered potentially beneficial for L2 learning through telecollaboration practices in particular. Since the SCMC occurring between learners on online language learning communities is a form of telecollaboration because it encourages the development of intercultural and communicative skills, it is necessary to provide a review of the main practices occurred in the literature in order to explain how this research aims to contribute to the field.

Research in L2 learning communities has mainly focused on the telecollaboration (or tandem learning) between geographically distant learners exchanging their native lan-

guages in online chat rooms and on the process of socialization and identity development in the L2. Lam (2000, 2004, 2009), for instance, conducted ethnographic, long-term, qualitative studies on Chinese immigrant teenager who developed a stronger and stronger English identity within an online fan community by means of online chats. The author stressed the idea of the transcultural, glocal (global and local) identities that influence and foster language practices in online settings. Black (2007, 2008, 2009) carried out similar long-term ethnographic studies on learners' identities in a fan fiction community¹⁰. She showed that in such environments learners were able to negotiate and shape in the TL their identities as competent fan fiction writers through the transnational online interactions with other learners. Pasfield-Neofitou (2007a, 2007b, 2009), examined the intercultural online chat between learners of Japanese and their geographically distant native friends and how they used this medium both as an opportunity to strengthen their social bonds and for informal language learning. Not only did she find that the chat cemented these relations but also that the visual nature of the text-based chat facilitated repair when learners had as primary goal language learning rather than social interaction.

Previous studies stressed both benefits and drawbacks of employing telecollaboration in L2 learning settings. The main affordances of telecollaboration consist in triggering students' motivation and TL output and in being an opportunity for learners to intertwine international contacts and to be in contact with NSs of the TL in particular. This has the beneficial effect of enhancing learners' intercultural competence (Belz, 2003; O'Dowd, 2003), cultural awareness, pragmatic competence (Belz & Kinginger, 2002; Gonzales, 2012) and communicative competence (Toyoda & Harrison, 2002, Warschauer, 1998). However, telecollaboration presents some constraints and can provoke some tensions among L2 learners. These problems mainly regard the fact that students often belong to different social and institutional dimensions, which leads to a high probability of miscommunication and misunderstanding among them (Belz, 2001, 2003). A further source of conflict is related to the incorrect assumption that the telecollaboration experience in itself automatically promotes language learning. This is not true if telecollaborative activities are not specifically designed to achieve given outcomes and if relevant pedagogical tasks are not provided (Belz & Kinginger, 2002; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002). Another

¹⁰ Fan fiction describes the process by which the fans of a given media or pop icon create fictional texts that usually expand the text of the original work (for instance, the prequels or sequels of a popular series or book).

tension derives from the fact that both students and teachers agree on different norms and purposes for the telecollaboration experience and have different expectations (Kramersch & Thorne, 2002; Ware, 2005). In Ware (2005)'s study, for instance, it emerged that purposes and goals for telecollaboration, reasons for studying the TL, motivation and use of time, and level of technological expertise diverged significantly among two groups of German and English students studying their respective languages. This implies that a previous discussion among students in relation to the purposes of their online activity and the goals they want to achieve plays an important role.

Research in networks and CALL has usually employed Sociocultural Theory to explain online interactions (Belz & Kinginger, 2002; Thorne, 2003) or to analyse collaborative online interactions and open-ended tasks in L2 classrooms (Darhower, 2007; Tanaka, 2005; Tudini, 2010). Tanaka, for instance, analysed how learners of Japanese interpreted and completed open-ended tasks in collaborative interaction through an asynchronous web forum and adopted Myers' (2000) framework for the identification of different types of collaboration: leaders and followers (a group leader supplies all the answers and the group follows him/her), turn-taking (equal division of labour for task completion), cooperative production (each member makes his/her partial contribution to be added to the whole) and individual production (students find a solution by themselves, it is not considered as an interaction). In her case study, Tanaka analysed students' online conversations, their interactions, the outcome of their interactions, the role played by each participant and how learners try to learn from the interactions. She found two examples of collaborative interaction, turn-taking and cooperative production drawing on Vygotskian concepts of scaffolding and mediation. However, the opportunities to use the TL were not frequent and the L1 played a fundamental role.

In similar ways, Tudini (2010) explored the role of online chat in supporting the teaching and learning of foreign languages in open-ended tasks. She made use of a CA approach, and provided extracts from dyadic conversations between Italian learners of English and NSs, showing how they pursue the learning of FL and culture during online text chat. Her study contributes to the understanding of how conversation in a FL unfolds between NSs and learners in the spontaneous contexts of online chats, rather than in the classroom. She explores important aspects occurring in the real-time textual conversations such as repair, negotiation of meaning, peer assistance, visual saliency and noticing.

Similarly, Darhower (2007) studied a bilingual telecollaborative chat setting of learners of Spanish and English identifying linguistic and social affordances in learners' online conversations while they carried out their weekly tasks. The linguistic affordances (Van Lier, 2000) draw on SLA concepts such as comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981), negative feedback (Alijaafreh & Lantolf, 1994) and scaffolding (Donato, 1994; Wood et al., 1976). Instead social affordances (Van Lier, 2000) refer to rejections, invitations, demands and humour. The author analysed learners' roles and norms in the community and their evolution over time, as well as their provision of linguistic and social affordances. He contrasted two groups, the former presenting higher levels of participation and cohesion, the latter affected by absenteeism and low level of participation and membership, and suggested possible directions for L2 online assistance improvement.

Liaw & English (2013) implemented a telecollaboration project, *Beyond these Walls*, between University students in Taiwan and France. Students had to study English through intercultural learning and a sequence of tasks designed by the teacher aimed to foster intercultural competence via asynchronous text, audio and video exchanges. Students had to work on an official website and coupled with an unofficial *Facebook* group for informal interactions. The authors analysed students' interactions on both the project website and on the *Facebook* group and found a shift in register and communication style correspondent to the shift of mediational tool from the formal to the informal environment. The authors also reported that while in the official website the participants limited to carry out their tasks on the bases of their assignments, on the *Facebook* group they tended to disclose their identities and personal values more, easily more interactive dialogue took place and more intercultural competence was fostered, with authentic use of the TL.

Gonzales' study (2012) is one of the few studies about telecollaboration on the *Livemocha* online community. It is a longitudinal study on L2 pragmatics from a conversation analytical perspective and addresses conversation closings. Moreover, it relies on naturalistic data. Gonzales' study revolved around the L2 pragmatic development (strategies in conversation closings) in CMC. The author analysed user perception interviews and online interactions of seven learners participating in *Livemocha* over the course of one academic year. These learners interacted in the TL (Spanish) with NSs in self-directed conversa-

tions. She wanted to discover what type of conversation patterns occurred in conversations between Spanish language learners and NSs in *Livemocha*, how these patterns differ over the course of the ongoing conversation, how NSs influence learners and what were learners' perceptions about these exchanges. Another question her study addressed was whether telecollaboration activities can promote language learning without pedagogical intervention. Therefore, she explored user-driven, naturalistic participation in telecollaborative exchanges in *Livemocha*. The author analysed their conversation closings over time and found several patterns in conversation closings such as thanking, apologizing and making future plans. She found a shift in rapport management between the participants and the NSs and found that NSs influenced language use over time. She also discovered that those who expressed higher levels of enthusiasm for *Livemocha* showed a higher level of participation.

Additional case studies need to be conducted to analyse how learners' ties develop over time thanks to these telecollaborative exchanges and to define learners' perceptions about the language partnerships and about their learning during the interactions. On the basis of the aforementioned meaningful studies, this thesis seeks to provide its own contribution to a better understanding of the dynamics of SCMC in online chats in the non-formal learning of online communities designed for L2 learning.

1.2.2. L2 learning practices and studies in SNSs

The literature exploring educational L2 practices using SNSs as collaboration tools agree on the general potential of SNSs for L2 learning (Blake, 2009; Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Lafford, 2009). Some of the main aspects usually associated with social networking practices in L2 learning are the sense of community and expansion of the classroom walls in informal modalities. Blattner and Fiori (2009), for example, underlined how joining groups on *Facebook* allows learners to interact in the TL and observed that promoting a community of learners could be extremely useful and positively impact student's engagement. According to them, the sense of community and belonging can favour learners' socio-pragmatic awareness, and reflection on cross-cultural differences. However, other researchers have more negative views about the adoption of SNSs in L2 practice. Leis (2014), for instance, found that the use of *Twitter* (<https://twitter.com/>) in the English class is effective in fostering learning autonomy in those students who possess good levels of self-confidence in the TL. But less confident students showed anxiety and were

not particularly motivated in using *Twitter* again. Less positive results can be found in Sani and Bature (2014)'s study. They highlighted the negative impact of unguided use of social networks in the writing of ESL students in academic settings in Nigeria. They found that the use of SNSs had a negative impact on students' writing behaviours since students showed writing impediments on three main levels: lexis, punctuation and grammar. According to the authors, SNSs are an obstacle to bookish reading culture and are not an aid to write the TL fluently.

The literature so far has commonly explored SNSs potential for L2 by means of the conceptual framework of experiential learning. Experiential learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984:41). In other words, when living a concrete experience, learners start reflecting on it and then transform their observations into abstract concepts that, in turn, lead to active experimentation. Under this conceptual framework, for example, Arnold and Paulus (2010) made use of a SNS, *Ning* (<http://www.ning.com/>) to teach eight students a blended CALL course. Students' perceptions about the use of *Ning* confirmed that community building is a key-factor, and also gave birth to other considerations. The chat contributed to this feeling of belonging but, at the same time, conveyed a sense of artificiality because it was used by students who were in the same classroom. In addition, the open structure of the SNS, with everybody's work publicly available, allowed modelling and peer feedback while carrying out the assignments. Basically, among learners reading each other's profile pages, also occurred a number of invisible interactions that were invisible to the instructor and that go under the name of “pedagogical lurking” (Arnold & Paulus, 2010:194; Dennen, 2008). Pedagogical lurking is the process by which students read the other learners' posts without posting anything. Even though students do not post contributions, they are still engaged in the online discussion and reflect on the contributions made by peers. Pedagogical lurking is considered as a fundamental aspect of online learning (Dennen, 2008). Similar insightful studies have taken into consideration *Twitter's* potential for microblogging in the L2 (Antenos-Conforti, 2009; Borau, Ullrich, Feng & Shen, 2009). In Antenos-Conforti's study, learners' syllabus required that they interacted in the TL (Italian) twice a week with the teacher, with NSs (the community was extended over time) and among them. At the end of the term learners' perceptions obtained by means of a survey revealed that the social networking activities helped them reduce their

“affective filter” (Krashen, 1981:22) when communicating in the language, enhanced their willingness to communicate (WTC) (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément & Noels, 1998), and improved their grammatical structures and vocabulary. Curiously, she also found that her students of Italian, beyond the pedagogical tasks assigned, had started interacting informally and spontaneously in the TL through Twitter with other users of the SNS who were not involved in the project.

In these meaningful studies, an analysis of learners’ conversations in these semi-spontaneous settings would have probably led to a deeper understanding of whether real opportunities for negotiation of meaning and peer assistance really occur. Borau et al. (2009) provide more hints in this sense. They conducted an analysis of the community interactions, taking into consideration two aspects of communicative competence¹¹ (Canale & Swain, 1980), sociolinguistic and strategic competence. The sociolinguistic competence refers to the ability to use the language in an appropriate way and to adapt it to different styles, settings, topics and people to convey specific attitudes and feelings. The strategic competence is the ability to manage the conversation flow and handle communication breakdowns through peer assistance and online dictionaries. They found that, despite the word limitation to 140 characters, *Twitter* seemed to push learners in the enhancement of these competences. About the sociolinguistic competence, in particular, they pointed out that learners’ style in microblogging was mixed and that they tended to combine colloquial expressions with more formal ones that are considered less appropriate to the informal environment of the online community. Nevertheless, the learners’ employment of mixed expressions, rather than depending on a lack of sociolinguistic competence and inability to distinguish between colloquial and high register, might be totally conscious and due to the online environment that is blurred in itself and open to mixed styles. A longitudinal study would have probably given more insight whether learners really needed to improve this competence and whether a real improvement actually occurred. Similarly, Blattner & Fiori (2011) investigated a group of undergraduate students enrolled in a Spanish course developing their multiliteracy and L2 socio-pragmatic competence. The authors identified, through the *Facebook* group application, all those groups related to the Spanish course and conducted a linguistic analysis of

¹¹ Communicative competence is considered as the main goal of language learning and it belongs to the communicative approach to language learning. It consists of four components: Grammatical competence (words and grammar rules); sociolinguistic context (appropriateness to the context); discourse competence (cohesion and coherence), and strategic competence (use of communicative strategies), (Canale & Swain, 1980).

greetings, leave-takings and particular expressions in the TL. They found that not only were students able to identify these elements on online group conversations, but they also started practising their socio-pragmatic skills employing the same expressions in their CMC.

Beyond the communication of class content and pieces of information, current experimentations with SNS and L2 revolved around task-based reading-writing activities, such as short stories written in collaboration, creative writing assignments (explanation of why choosing a given poem), trivial questions, short murder mystery with a story to reconstruct and to solve (Mork, 2009; Mills, 2011). Mills (2011), for example, adapted *Facebook* to a community of practice for an intermediate-level French course and found that its main affordances were joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire, the three main features that constitute a community of practice in the situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998a, 1998b). In this project, students and teacher created an imagined French community on a *Facebook* group (the Parisian building) and each student had to create a fictitious profile on the SNS, represent a francophone character, play with this new identity and, at the same time, carry out task-based activities within this setting. This study offers a further demonstration of the crucial role played by learner's identity (whether fictitious or real) and its investment in these online social environments, where identity is continuously questioned, negotiated and shaped by the online interactions.

As this last study demonstrates, research in the field has frequently associated SNSs and L2 learning with learners' co-construction of a social identity in the surrounding environment (Kelley, 2010a, 2010b; McBride, 2009; Mills, 2011) through the concept of "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991; Carroll, Motha, & Price, 2008; Norton, 2001; Reinhardt & Chen, 2013), referring to the sense of belonging to a community of learners. McBride (2009), for example, discussed SNSs potential for language learning and held that SNSs are environments where multiple identities are performed and where L2 students have the opportunity to self-author their selves and develop their pragmatic competence and critical self-awareness.

A valuable exploration of the affordances of SNSs for L2 learning has been mainly conducted in eastern contexts like Japan and China in the field of English as a foreign lan-

guage (EFL), and has mainly dealt with the social dimension of learning in a community, intermingling three main focus: learners' identity (Reinhardt & Zander, 2011; Kelley, 2010a, 2010b; McBride, 2009), learner's autonomy (Halvorsen, 2009; McCarty, 2009) and motivation enhancement (Kikuchi & Otsuka, 2008; McCarty, 2009; Kelley, 2010a, 2010b).

In a study carried out in Japan, for example, Halvorsen (2009) attempted to demonstrate that SNSs favour motivation, identity formation, student empowerment, learner autonomy, critical thinking, collaboration and support, according to the Vygotskian social-constructivist paradigm on which the author bases his research. He monitored a group of University students of English blogging on *MySpace* for the duration of a semester. Their regular blogging was a course requirement as well as their comments to their peers' blogs. At the end of the course, the author submitted a final questionnaire followed by informal interviews in order to gain the students' evaluation to the course, which was positive. According to the author, future research needs to look at how students perceived their own degree of autonomy during the language learning process.

In similar ways, McCarty (2009) tried to enter learners' informal territory going "behind student lines" (p. 187) and enhancing the integrative motivation of students toward the TL (English) community through the social network *Mixi* (<https://mixi.jp/>) which is very common in Japan. He identified potential affordances in social networking with students in terms of personal engagement and transformative, experiential learning and showed that SNSs can nurture a bilingual environment and open up spaces for authentic collaboration in a FL environment.

Kelley (2010a, 2010b) took a step forward and tried to explore empirically SNSs affordances for fostering imagined communities, that is, online communities where an idealized L2 speaking self-experiences his sense of membership and a real-life experience. He conducted an exploratory study on a Chinese EFL class to verify whether the potential of the SNS (the US version of *Myspace*) was actualized in terms of motivation enhancement. Data demonstrated that the effects of social networks on motivation intensification were mainly related to the learning environment itself, that is, to the idea of an imagined community for intercultural exchange and learning and to the learner's identity as ideal self disclosing his country and culture. Another point of discussion concerns the

multimodal nature of communication of a SNS that in Kelley's study was compromised and limited by the Chinese government. The author made an interesting point. Despite its functional limitations, an international and intercultural community like *MySpace*, spread all over the world, is likely to work better than a local-based community like a Chinese social network, because it fosters intercultural interests during the learning process and because learners have the genuine impression of inhabiting a community of speakers of the TL. He also added that the limited means of the SNS in the Chinese context might have worked as a further motivational trigger by pushing learners in finding creative solutions to overcome technical barriers.

Reinhardt and Zander (2011) achieved other insightful results. They investigated over time cohorts of intermediate-level students on an L2 learning community during intensive English program (IEP) in the USA and their informal and formal use of the SNS *Facebook* respectively outside and inside the classroom. The instruction aimed to raise awareness of SNS literacy and socialization practices in this CoP of English and relied on situated-learning principles related to the development of new practices and affiliation within the community (Gee, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and on the bridging-activity model (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008). In bridging-activity model students have to develop their critical language awareness by introducing in the class those internet-mediated L2 texts and practices they are interested in. The critical understanding of the online linguistic and social features of these everyday practices would lead to an improvement in the L2 (Reinhardt & Zander, 2011; Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008). Following this model, Reinhardt and Zander analysed the classroom discourse and learners' work throughout the course and made use of ethnographic techniques like surveys and interviews to see whether the varieties of home and institutional discourses in which students participated enacted learners' identities both online and offline, and how their "discourse-enacted identities" (p. 333) interacted with their institutional practices. The results based on students' perceptions during the surveys and the interviews reported that the SNS instruction opened learners to the interactions in English as a lingua franca of international value and promoted the development of transcultural identities. Nevertheless, they also found that more established, traditional home practices led to a resistance in the adoption of the SNS for educational L2 practices. This was the case of a group of Chinese, who preferred their Chinese local SNS, *RenRen* (<http://www.renren.com/>), to *Facebook* partially because the Chinese government blocked the access to *Facebook* and western

technologies, but also because they wanted to maintain their social bonds with their contacts in the home country and were reluctant to speak English in the USA. Further research should throw light on these same students' identity performance and L2 study habits in the online community after the end of the IEP and examine whether their strengthened their social bonds within the L2 community. In fact, the interactions occurred during the IEP were not totally spontaneous and were mostly mediated by the activities and the assignments given to the students. But we do not know whether the sense of community created in the SNS and the transcultural identities originated in that environment had a long-lasting effect after the end of all the activities. Following their valuable contribution, more investigation of peer assistance, feedback and correction in the L2 during these interactions would shed light on the real opportunities for L2 improvement in the SNS.

As these projects demonstrate, research about the potential advantages and opportunities of SNSs as L2 learning spaces is developing more and more. However, finding the way to make the most out of L2 learning opportunities (whether in formal or informal settings) in online social networks is not an easy task and the actual realization of all the potentialities of SNSs is still a challenge for teachers, learners and researchers in the field. In addition, many of these studies are based on quantitative questionnaires in formal settings, in contexts where students were subjected to evaluation and were often request to interact with peers as part of their learning activities. More research is needed to obtain a further detailed analysis of the perceptions and behaviours of those learners who spontaneously decide to inhabit these online communities independently of the attendance of a formal course and a syllabus. This study attempts to fill this gap and to be an extension of the insightful analysis of online communities through the lens of Sociocultural Theory.

The next section, reviewing the most significant studies conducted in the field of online communities for L2 learning, further delves into the main issues of this investigation.

1.2.3. Studies about L2 learning in online communities

In this section, I will analyse those studies conducted in the realm of online communities designed specifically for L2 learning that are springing up in recent years, the investigation of which is still in its infancy. Firstly, I will outline the state of the art and then I will

explain the gaps this study aimed to address in order to add more knowledge to the existing research in the field. Previous contributions mainly include descriptive studies (Huffman, 2011; Jee & Park, 2009; Liaw, 2011; Lisbôa & Coutinho, 2013; Loiseau, Potolia & Zourou, 2011; Pereira & Pinto, 2010; Potolia, Loiseau & Zourou, 2011; Zourou & Lamy, 2013; Zourou & Loiseau, 2013), quantitative/qualitative studies (Andriani, 2014; Brick, 2011; Chwo, et al., 2012; Lin, 2012; Liu, et al., 2013; Lloyd, 2012; Lopes & Coutinho, 2013; Stevenson & Liu, 2010) and ethnographic studies (Chotel, 2012, 2013; Chotel & Mangenot, 2011; Clark & Gruba, 2010; Gruba & Clark, 2013; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Orsini-Jones, Brick, & Pibworth, 2011, 2013; Pibworth, 2011).

The descriptive studies mainly provide a review of the main pedagogical features of these online communities, in relation to the social web and to the role of the user/learner within the community (Loiseau, et al., 2011; Potolia, et al., 2011). These studies also regard the implementation of these communities both under a technical and pedagogical point of view. Zourou and Loiseau (2013), for instance, analysed users' practices in the Culture section of *Livemocha* platform and found little interaction and little learning activity among peers aside from three interactional episodes of peer support. Moreover, they pointed out that there was no participation among learners (learners did not usually post comments to each other's contribution), no content reuse and no connection between this section of the platform and the didactic materials.

The quantitative/qualitative studies tend to insist on developing the pedagogical design of these communities according to the learners' needs. Brick (2011), for instance, examined seven learners over a period of three months who were required to explore *Livemocha*, take notes about their experiences and who were later group interviewed. It emerged that the participants preferred the asynchronous and synchronous tools of the SNS to the language learning materials. However, in the online interactions participants did not benefit from a key principle of tandem learning, reciprocity (Little, 2003), according to which each partner should get equal advantage out of the tandem experience. This was attributed to the predominance of learners who wanted to learn English over NSs of English wanting to learn a FL. Among the other problems of *Livemocha*, the author mentions the poor quality of the learning material and of the feedback provided by peers, and the difficulty and the long time necessary to build a language partnership between peers. Another aspect of the online community is "cyberflirting", which a flirting behav-

ious taking place during online interactions usually enacted by men and addressed to women. It does not necessarily have a negative connotation and it does not necessarily represent an obstacle to language learning provided that both the partners accept it. The positive aspects of the community outlined by participants of the study regarded the possibility to have contacts with NSs and to receive immediate feedback from them.

Stevenson and Liu (2010) conducted their research on *Babble*, *Palabea* and *Livemocha* by submitting a usability test on five potential users with the aim to explore the pedagogical and technical usability of these sites, taking into account several aspects, from the pedagogical content to the interactional features of these communities. They found these social networks provide potential for language learning but that more research is required to improve the effectiveness of these environments under the pedagogical point of view according to specific long-term learning outcomes. According to the authors, because empirical research in this area scarce, it leaves open questions about important aspects, such as the proportion of users who have actually completed the courses, the development and uptake of user-generated materials, and the relationship between language learning and social interactions within the community. Unlike Brick (2011) and Clark and Gruba (2010), Stevenson and Liu (2010) found that L2 social networkers on these sites were more interested in the available pedagogical instruments rather than in friending people and in the interactional features of the community. Harrison and Thomas's (2009) study, similarly, found that learners tended to create networks with the sole purpose of language learning rather than for social reasons.

More recent studies have started taking into account learners' point of view and learners' personal styles of learning. Chwo, et al. (2012), for instance, adopt such an approach. They selected 13 volunteers to participate in a 6-month trial period to use *Livemocha* as EFL learners. At the end of the trial, they conducted interviews and a questionnaire with the objective of discovering more about learners' evaluation of *Livemocha* and whether this had a correlation with their learning style and learning strategy with learners' level of satisfaction of the site. The results showed that writing, chatting and speaking were deemed as the most attractive activities and they did not find any significant correlation between learning style or strategy and attitudes to *Livemocha*. However, they found significant correlations among participants' learning attitude, degree of satisfaction, and

visual design and functionalities of the website. The authors underlined that it is necessary to explore these variables further in order to improve learning results.

In relation to learners' point of view, Komatsu's (2011) survey on the potential of SNSs for L2 learning was inspiring because, as quoted in Harrison (2013), Komatsu analysed *Livemocha* under the perspective of the teacher and she raised several important questions that still need more investigation, such as, if it is possible for learners to set their own goals while they are in these communities, if learning is sustainable after the novelty factor and the initial impact of these environments, if learners can be supported and how, how meaningful the feedback submitted by users should be, and what the roles of teachers and learners should be.

Among the remarkable quantitative studies there is also Lloyd (2012). The author investigated the use of *Livemocha* by a group of language learners enrolled in a formal course over a 10-week period. He was interested in finding out learners' WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998), that is, how learners exploited the community in order to seek for opportunities to use the TL. He took into consideration two main variables: learner personality type (using a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator¹²) and their familiarity with social media tools and applications. He gathered data by means of two questionnaires, focus groups sessions and log-sheets participants were required to submit. He found out that the WTC in a synchronous way was higher in the case of those students who scored a higher tendency towards extroversion in the MBTI test. These students tended to develop and strengthen the social bonds intertwined in *Livemocha* and in *Skype*¹³ (<http://www.skype.com/>). On the contrary, those students who exhibited a higher level of introversion in the test used to express their WTC asynchronously. Learners' perception analysis through interviews and the analysis of their interactive talk would have provided further insights to this valuable study. In addition, relying on a small group of volunteers recruited specifically for the project (lasting a short time span) and who quit the platform after it, more re-

¹² Personality test developed by Myers-Briggs. <http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/>

¹³ *Skype* is a free application connecting distant users whose computers are scattered all over the world. It is provided of a voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) and instant messaging (IM). Among its affordances there is the possibility to send files during the conversation, its user-friendliness (users can contact other users by simply clicking on their names listed in the contact list) and its social networking application that allows the simultaneous connection of a group of people. The connection among users can occur in three ways that can be even employed simultaneously; (1) the textual chat through the instant messaging system, (2) the audio call and (3) the video call through the VoIP.

search would be needed to discover more about the spontaneous dynamics generated in the platform.

Liu, et al. (2013) examined university ESL students' use and perceptions of *Busuu*, *Live-mocha* and *English Café* (<http://www.englishcafe.es/>). They wanted to discover what social networking tools university students used most and their perceptions about it. In order to do so, they selected 21 students from different countries attending an English Program at the University in the US and started giving tasks within the community taking into account the SNS features over a six-week period. Students performed their learning tasks as part of their in-class activities. By means of surveys (at the beginning and at the end of the period) they found that the online communities gave students the possibility to connect with other learners despite some reluctance to make friends with strangers. They also found that the online communities encouraged autonomy and collaboration; language learners with different abilities and skills could participate in building a distributed knowledge base for meeting their own and others' language learning needs. They also remarked that the option of receiving feedback from other users is a very important affordance of this site and that the lack of feedback could negatively influence learners' commitment to the websites. Finally, Liu et al. (2015) explored the affordances of *LingQ* (<https://www.lingq.com/>), *Lang-8* (<http://lang-8.com>), *Italki* and *Polyglotclub* (<http://polyglotclub.com/>) both under the perspective of a teacher by an analysis of these websites and under learners' perspective doing usability tests on 6 university students. Their results revealed that if students are properly trained and guided by their teachers, especially on how to give and provide peer feedback, these communities have a potential for L2 learning but in their case this potential was not realized. Given that these communities vary in terms of how they display their characteristics, the authors also suggest that teachers wishing to employ them for formal learning activities should first analyse these characteristics and see how and which ones suit their students' needs best. Their important contribution they made was to provide examples of pedagogical tasks to combine the informal practices of social networking in these communities with teaching in-class contexts fomenting online interactions. An analysis of interaction among peers while they were carrying out these pedagogical tasks would have generated even more insights on learning dynamics in such environments.

Lin's (2012) study investigated learners' attitudes, practices and interactions in *Livemocha*. Through an online survey, online interviews and analysis of the interactions to 20 case-study participants, it emerged that users' perceptions are generally positive about the online community and the possibility to communicate with NSs. However, he found sources of attrition in this community. This attrition is mainly due to negative feedback from peers, which was deemed as discouraging, and to the low quality of the didactic affordances. In line with all the studies carried out, Lin (2012) also found a progressive decrease of learners' engagement. The study reported learners perceived that they were learning, but the analysis of the case-study participants did not show evidence of progress in language learning during the interactions. In addition, these case studies are not fully representative of the whole environment because they were Chinese participants studying English. An analysis covering learners from different backgrounds and contexts would help trace a more complete picture. Moreover, the interactions analysed in this study occurred in the process of peer review after the submission of exercises. The analysis of learners from different contexts and backgrounds interacting in the chat tool (free conversations) would shed more light on the interactional dynamics occurring in these communities, which are still little known among researchers. As Lin pointed out, multiple sources of data obtained longitudinally at different points of time would shed light on learners' progress, on their dynamics of socialization and on their interactions in these online communities. The author also underlined the need of more investigation on the role played by learner autonomy and on the affordances and the constraints of the online communities for L2 learning through ethnographic methods.

Among the ethnographic studies, it is worthy to mention Harrison and Thomas's (2009) research around the use of *Livemocha* in a formal Applied Linguistics (AL) course in Japan. Relying on the short-term observations and on the reports released by the students, the authors showed that the system seems to offer the possibility to provide a Personal Learning Environment (PLE) for an active L2 learning experience. The authors drew on Boyd and Ellison's (2007) five main features to describe SNSs and applied them to their pilot study in *Livemocha*. The first feature is named *impression management* and refers to the way users manage their identities in the social network profile. The authors found that, unlike general SNSs such as *Facebook*, where users display their real self, in *Livemocha* they prefer not to disclose much about their selves and cloak their real identity. The second feature is related to *friendship management* and *social bonding* and is strictly related to the first.

Providing users false identity, they observed that trust was more difficult to achieve and more intimate relationships were usually less likely to consolidate. However, the authors investigated a very small sample of people (six master's students) for a too short period of time (three months). The third feature concerns the *role of the users* and the *network structure*. According to their observations, the system itself leads users to create roles and to act as novices and experts of the language in an autonomous way. At the same time, because of the open architecture of the system, learners can easily find *mediators* (fourth feature), or more capable peers, to establish learning relationships and be, in turn, mediators themselves for other learners. Finally, in relation to the last feature, *bridging online and real life*, they outlined that students had the perception that *Livemocha* was similar to an informal setting where you can meet NSs of the TL. Another insight came from another student who saw in the online community an overlapping place of home, work and school, which could broadly correspond to informal, non-formal and formal settings.

In line with the aforementioned pioneering study (Harrison & Thomas, 2009), research has mainly revolved around ethnographic studies conducted in formal learning environments and involving classrooms. Clark & Gruba (2010), for example, conducted an autoethnographic study of *Livemocha* and attempted an analysis of affordances and constraints of the platform in relation to pedagogical issues. From their analysis it emerged that motivation is initially triggered by the design and the interface of the SNS, by the exercise submission system, by the immediate feedback received by NSs, and by the easiness to come into contact with them thanks to the system facilities (especially the video and the textual chat). Another trigger for motivation was due to the sense of goal achievement and rewarding embedded in the system (the progress bar after completing a task, or a unit, the points acquired after doing revisions and exercise submission). Finally, the possibility to record oneself while speaking and writing was considered a motivational factor by the authors probably because it would allow learners to monitor themselves at a time distance. But whether this actually occurs or not is unknown. In their analysis they underlined that after a period of initial motivation, a sensation of frustration arose followed by demotivation. One of the main demotivational factors listed is lesson content because it seems to retrieve the audio-lingual method of the 70s and is mainly based on word-lists and repetitive pattern drills of the structuralist approach with stimulus and automatic response. An interesting point was made about the lack of interaction in the lessons, which occurs without negotiation of interaction. Another problem was

given by the presence of a menu used for translation purposes but that did not assist learners in using the TL.

Similar results were found in Pibworth (2011), who stressed the lack of interaction between the synchronous and the asynchronous tools of these communities, and in Orsini-Jones, Brick & Pibworth (2011), who pointed out that the affordances of these communities favour students who want to learn individually at their own pace. Orsini-Jones, Brick & Pibworth (2013) provided a further contribution to the field because they conducted an autoethnographic study under the perspective of “expert learners” (p. 41), that is, a group of undergraduates studying to become future English language teachers. Their findings confirmed Clark and Gruba (2010) conclusions on the progressive lack of motivation and they attributed demotivation to cyberflirting and to the didactic materials that do not match with the actual language proficiency of the users. A contribution to these previous accurate analyses should offer more pedagogical suggestions for improving the platform and the quality of L2 learning and should take into consideration multiple cases of real participants performing their L2 (rather than simply the researcher’s perspective or the perspective of “expert learners”). The present investigation is in part addressing these pedagogical issues by taking into account the various perspectives of different learner profiles, to identify if there are expert learners, how they take advantage of multiple possibilities of these communities and what affordances they find appropriate for their language learning practice.

Gruba & Clark (2013) conducted an autoethnographic study of *Livemocha*, *Busuu* and *Babbel* with a focus on formative assessment activities and found alienating exercises, unsatisfying and unrewarding peer assessment system, and difficulty at establishing relationships with language partners. The authors stressed that research should focus more on interactional and assessment practices in these communities by means of ethnographic approaches, semi-structured interviews and chat-logs.

Harrison (2013), through an ethnomethodological approach, investigated a small group of seven postgraduate students who were asked to use *Livemocha* in out-of-class and in in-class settings during a 15- week course. Periodically students were asked to elicit their reflections on the usage of this community and, at the end of the course, they were requested to submit a final paper with their reflections. Results showed that students

evaluated learners materials as generally positive but that setting learning goals was hard, the evaluation process was not clear and the learning experience with the other learners was fragmentary and at random, leading to demotivation. Harrison also found that students did not consider *Livemocha* as a SNS like *Facebook* because they saw the community just as a learning environment and did not appreciate the ways one's profile is presented, displaying personal information not related to language learning without the possibility of customizing the privacy settings. In this study, students exhibited the ability to recognise the benefits of trustworthy people sharing the same interests and that could help them reciprocally. They had their own criteria and rules to evaluate adequate language partners and reported feeling anxious and uncomfortable at establishing friendship relationships on the platform and very sensitive towards flirting episodes. This study focused on learners' profiles showing how central they are because they are the first thing that learners experience. This study involved a restricted number of people without analysing learner background more in depth. More research is needed on learners' profiles, taking into account learners from different background and settings and also taking into consideration learner impression management in relation to other social networks and to the social web at large.

Chotel & Mangenot (2011) provided other interesting insights. They conducted an ethnographic study on *Busuu* and *Babbel* to discover more about the potential of these communities for social and cognitive self-instruction and found out that rather than favouring learner autonomy, these communities consider it as pre-requirement. This study generates more questions revolving around the role of learners in these communities, how they perceive their autonomy and whether and how they are able to take charge of their own learning. Chotel's study (2012) provides even more insights in this sense. She analysed the learning activity of three Chinese students in *Busuu* under the lens of AT (Engeström, 1987) and of a more anthropocentric approach. By means of screen capture recordings, questionnaires, learning diaries and focus group, she observed that learners enacted different learning actions fluctuating between human-computer interaction and mediated interaction and she found that, while the former seemed inappropriate for language learning, instead the latter had some potential for SLA through mutual learning. In addition, she underscored the need of establishing a link between formal and non-formal learning to sustain the development of autonomy in these language communities. Through screen capture recordings, she was able to observe the ongoing learner dis-

course on the chat and their usage of the learning tools. In the end she found that the three learners showed little interest for the didactic material despite having dedicated a significant amount of time, and showed more interest for the online interactions. However, it was not always easy to achieve this interaction. Chotel (2012) found that the potential multiple possibilities for interactions present on these communities and the presence of many users creates a situation of *zapping* interactions among learners. This situation is due to the fact that many of these potential interlocutors for the French-Chinese exchange were not actually online and this made it difficult to find adequate language partners. The author also underlined that one of the reasons for the lack of useful exchanges could be due to the absence of adequate support to orientate learners in their self-learning process when interacting with each other. Without the support of a human tutor or pedagogic guides, the interlocutors tended to have ordinary conversations and spontaneous interactions with little evidence of peer-to-peer L2 learning. However, the thematic analysis of learners' exchanges revealed a potential for L2 learning (if adequately supported) because they showed interest for their peers' TL and culture and for their sense of investment in the TL. In relation to the tools available for the interaction (the textual chat, the video-chat and the forum), her results revealed that learners did not consider the asynchronous exchanges of the forum as dynamic and disregarded the synchronic features requiring the use of a webcam because they did not want to interact with strangers. Therefore, learners' preferred modality for communication was the quasi-synchronic feature of the textual chat.

1.2.4. How this study contributes to the field

The literature reviewed so far and these different types of useful contributions shed light on affordances and constraints of these online communities under technical and pedagogical points of view. But, looking at these three areas (L2 practices in SNSs, telecollaboration practices and online communities design for L2 learning), I identified some gaps that the present study wants to cover.

From the review of the aforementioned studies about L2 practices in SNSs, it is possible to maintain that more investigation is needed on learners' process of learning and learners' point of view in relation to the environment, also taking into account that there might be different learning behaviours corresponding to different types of users. More research should be longitudinal and should be conducted in a more holistic and systemic

way. It would be valuable to investigate further the quality and the types of the online interactions, how they develop, and the strategies enacted by learners to use the language and seek the most advantage out of the language partnership. All these aspects are crucial if we take into consideration that part of the literature (Brick, 2011; Chotel, 2012; Chotel & Mangenot, 2011; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Lloyd, 2012) has stressed that these online communities could play a valuable role if integrated in formal learning contexts and in telecollaboration projects, for instance. This thesis is an extension and a contribution to the analysis of L2 practices using SNSs through the lens of Sociocultural Theory made by a considerable number of researchers (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Halvorsen, 2009; McCarty, 2009). It adds more insights to the field because it takes into account the perception of online learners who have been selected in the SNSs rather than in a classroom context, whose way of inhabiting the communities is free and voluntary and not dependent on a syllabus.

With regard to the field of telecollaboration, much is yet to be learned about the dynamics generated within this online social networks and how such experiences might foster or impede opportunities for the use of the language. It would be valuable, for instance, to explore whether in their online interactions learners construct real opportunities for L2 use and L2 learning with the other networkers, that is, if they know how to interact with each other, when to offer assistance, how to take turns, how to show difficulty in comprehending each other's utterances (Kurata, 2011).

It is important to look at learners' spontaneous online conversations in these contexts in order to study the importance learners give to these exchanges, if they are aware and see a learning potential in it and the strategies they enact to communicate in the TL. In particular, despite the common enthusiasm about the potential of online communities as an ideal environment for scaffolded language interactions to take root and develop, more empirical research is needed on whether and how peer assistance is established among learners and on learners' behaviours, use and perceptions of learning tools to facilitate the L2 process. The present study makes a contribution to telecollaboration research at both micro and macro levels. At a micro level, it provides longitudinal, naturalistic data of spontaneous interactions among learners in a SCMC context, within communities designed for L2 learning and in absence of institutional organization and pedagogical intervention. At a macro level, it explores if and how peer assistance is established

among learners and on learners' use and perceptions of their learning tools to facilitate the L2 process.

Moreover, in relation to the collection of studies revolving around online communities designed for L2 learning, more studies are needed in the area of learner autonomy and without the guidance of a teacher in relation to L2 learning online communities. More research is also necessary to assess the sustainability of these environments and their effectiveness for meeting long-term learning outcomes, given that active members turn into less committed learner because of the tendency to intertwine weak ties. As the literature shows, in these online communities, learners' tendency is to build new social bonds at random (Chotel, 2012; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Liaw, 2011), which are weak and fragmentary. In relation to this aspect, there are issues deserving further study and exploration. More research should investigate these learners over a longer period of time and on whether, how and why some learners are able to shape their own network of language partners after facing the challenging zapping interactional situations. It would be necessary to confirm further whether learners prefer interactions to didactic tools because of the behaviourist learning tools of these platforms. In addition, further research should shed more light on the preferred mode for communication and on the reasons for this choice. Under a theoretical point of view, as Chotel (2012) herself pointed out, her study did not fully take advantage of AT and its potential for explaining learning processes. Her study focused on the second generation of AT, on four poles (subject, object, community and tools) and on three triads (subject-tools-objects; subject-community-tools; subject-tools-community). This study aims to take advantage of the whole activity system and on the third generation developed by Engeström (1987) by tackling the other elements (division of labour-rules) of the triangle that have not been considered in previous studies. This would allow me to identify with more clarity the contradictions present in these online communities and in learners' pedagogical behaviours with their peers. Finally, following Lin's (2012) study, more research on dynamics of socialization, interactional episodes and peer feedback that embrace different typologies of learners is needed and this thesis will cover this issue.

For all these reasons and considering these current gaps, this thesis aims to make a contribution to the current research in the field in order to gain a better understanding of

the learning activities on these online communities, which would lead to further observations and insights on the potentialities of these environments for language learning.

1.3. Conclusion

This chapter started with an overview of how learning practices occur in the social web, it provided a definition of the concepts of formal, non-formal and informal learning, and it described the concept of “lifelong learning”.

The following section of this chapter explained the concepts of “SNSs” and of “online community for L2 learning”, then it highlighted both the empirical and the descriptive studies carried out in these fields, taking into account also L2 telecollaboration practices occurring within online communities. After identifying the limitations of current research, the chapter explained how to compensate for the gaps previously described.

The next chapter will introduce the research questions and will propose socio cultural theory and AT as a suitable framework for explaining the dynamics of online communities and learners’ behaviours. Then, after explaining the key-concept of learner autonomy, the chapter moves on to describe the focus of this investigation more in depth.

[CHAPTER 2]

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

“To have another language is to possess a second soul.”

–Charlemagne

This chapter explains the aims and the research questions of the dissertation. Then, it delineates the theoretical framework used to describe the social and contextual focus of the research, focusing on the construction of opportunities for L2 learning within online communities. The thesis adopts a holistic approach that looks at the concept of learner autonomy and at L2 learning as a social dimension and as a practice that is socially co-constructed. At a macro level, this framework draws on some concepts from Sociocultural Theory combined with CHAT; at a micro level, it draws on CA, to analyse learners' online conversations. Hence, the chapter describes the epistemological and methodological decisions that have been addressed, the justification of the methods selected and how they reflect the theoretical framework. Then, the six phases of the study and the form of triangulation adopted in the methodology are introduced.

2.1. The purpose of the study

Considering the state of the art, the popularity of online communities for L2 learning in non-formal environments and the newness of research in these contexts, this study aims to address some of the current gaps in the existing research. It seeks to discover the ways in which participation in online language communities affects language learners in constructing opportunities to use the TL and develop their interlanguage. It also analyses the different forms of peer assistance and the different strategies enacted by L2 learners when seeking opportunities to adopt the TL, taking into account NSs and NNSs' informal interactions and different language proficiencies.

2.1.1. *The objectives and the research questions*

The objectives and the research questions of this dissertation cover three main areas: learners' behaviours (1), peer assistance (2) and time factor (3). These three main areas are considered from two different perspectives: didactic and social affordances of the platforms.

The *didactic affordances*¹⁴ resemble learning modalities typical of formal contexts (didactic units and the revision between peers of its focus-on-form exercises). Instead, the *social affordances* of these communities correspond to informal learning contexts (the chat tool).

The objectives of this thesis are the following:

1. To learn about the dynamics generated within online communities designed for L2 learning, taking into account learner autonomy and learners' goals. (Area of learners' behaviours)
2. To investigate whether learners create (and how) opportunities for interaction with their peers while they experience these communities and how peer assistance unfolds. (Area of peer assistance)
3. To determine the effectiveness of online communities for meeting long-term learning outcomes and the relationship between their affordances and learners' engagement over time. (Area of time factor)

Accordingly, there are two broad research questions regarding both the social and the didactical affordances of online communities. In addition, the first research question covers the areas of learners' behaviours and peer assistance, while the second research question covers the area of time factor.

1st Question. What kinds of opportunities for L2 use occur in online communities for L2 learning and what social and contextual factors affect and contribute to the construction of such opportunities and to learners' perceptions of L2 learning?

¹⁴ In this thesis, the term "didactic" has the double meaning of "teaching" and "learning".

Sub-questions in relation to the area of learners' behaviours (and performance):

- a. How do different uses of online communities and different patterns of behaviour contribute to different opportunities for L2 use?
- b. How (if) do learners take advantage of the conditions of self-learning that the uncontrolled learning environment of online communities offer?

These questions cover the level of the didactic and social affordances.

Sub-questions in relation to the area of peer assistance:

- a. Is there any evidence of effective peer assistance receiving and provision? Are learners aware of the reciprocity or lack of it between themselves and their peers?
- b. What kind of assistance do learners provide to each other? What strategies do learners enact to foster their peers' improvement in the L2 during the dyadic interactions?

Question b only concerns the level of social affordances (chat tool)

2nd Question. What are the affordances and constraints of online communities for L2 learning in relation to their effectiveness for long-term learning outcomes?

This second main question covers the area of time factor and it is broken down into the following sub-questions:

- a. Is learners' engagement with online communities maintained, increased or decreased over time?
- b. What is the relationship between the maintenance, decrease or increase of learners' engagement with the platform over time and (1) the social affordances, (2) the didactic affordances and (3) any other practice or environmental issue?

These questions cover the levels of the didactic and social affordances.

In the theoretical framework and methodological triangulation adopted for this doctoral thesis, I made decisions consistent with the aims and research questions. The following sections will focus on the theoretical framework that orients the investigation.

2.2. The social dimension of L2 learning in online communities

Sociocultural Theory is at the basis of current research on learning and online communities and, more specifically, L2 learning in online communities. Thus, this thesis is an extension to the analysis of online communities through the lens of Sociocultural Theory carried out by a considerable number of researchers (Belz, 2001; Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Halvorsen, 2009; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Kelley, 2010a, 2010b; Kurata, 2011; Lantolf, 2000; McCarty, 2009; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). The literature considers SNSs and online communities as formative environments for knowledge development in the L2 especially through online interactions. In online interactions, the communicative use of the TL is more beneficial to language development than formal accuracy. Online communities are deemed as social places where learners learn languages socially and where the social construction of meaning occurs through the interaction among users (Halvorsen, 2009; Lavin & Claro, 2005). Negotiation of meaning is a modification and reconstruction of the interaction. It occurs when learners and their peers anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in message comprehension. When learners negotiate meaning, they acquire increased intercultural awareness and overcome barriers like age, gender, cultural and social background (Krashen 1981, 1982, 1985). In the context of online communities, language practice is co-constructed by the way learners shape their identities and understand themselves and their social surroundings (Norton & Toohey, 2004) while they are interacting in the TL and negotiating meaning. The literature so far has pointed out that through peer collaboration learners spend a lot of their time constructing new online artifacts (Lavin & Claro, 2005), valuing multiple perspectives, building new understandings to empower themselves (Halvorsen, 2009; Pegrum, 2009). In line with sociocultural theoretical bases, learners construct their L2 knowledge by combining their prior knowledge with the new information created in SNSs and online communities through their interactions with different people (Akayoglu & Altun, 2009).

This thesis is employing AT as a sociocultural framework for the analysis of language learning practices following previous studies in the field (Blin 2012; Chotel, 2012; Kurata, 2011; Thorne, 2004). In addition, this study is drawing on the concept of learner autonomy to achieve a better understanding of the online communities designed for L2 learning based on the findings of previous literature (Mangenot & Chotel, 2011).

The next sections approach the theoretical sociocultural underpinnings of this study, explain AT and its application to online communities for L2 learning, and introduce the concept of learner autonomy. The sections will first describe the theoretical framework and will then explain how each theory and concept will be applied to the present study.

2.2.1. Sociocultural Theory and ZPD in online communities for L2 learning

This thesis mainly draws on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which is one of the most influential pedagogical theories on human learning and development. Sociocultural theory sees learning as a developmental process that is socially mediated and historically constructed. Sociocultural theory is rooted in constructivism and socio-constructivism.

The constructivist theory of learning, the formalization of which is commonly attributed to Piaget, focuses on the individual construction of knowledge (Piaget, 1954, 1970; Piaget & Inhelder, 1971). It is a "theory of knowing" and a theory about "coming to know" (Daloglu, Baturay & Yildirim, 2009; Fosnot, 1992), about how learners make meaning and process their learning, which is seen as an active, interpretative, building process of discovery and exploration. In constructivism learning is considered as an internal process and learning is constructed individually in individual mind.

Socio-constructivist theories extended the notion of learning beyond the individual cognitive development, emphasised the social dimension of human behaviour and considered learning as a result of social interaction. In socio-constructivism, learners make meaning of their experiences and knowledge has meaning only in a real, authentic context provided with many different sources and perspectives. Socio-constructivism is an umbrella term that embraces several theories and which was heavily influenced by Vygotsky and by his Sociocultural Theory.

Vygotsky was a Byelorussian psychologist (at his times the Soviet-Union) and his interests covered a wide range of disciplinary areas, from developmental psychology, child development and education to concept formation, the relation between learning and human development, and the interrelationship between language and thought. Belonging to the soviet Russian/Eastern world, which tends to stress the importance of the collectivity over the individual, his conception of learning and human development was much different from the individualistic vision of Western psychologists. In Vygotsky's work, learning and development are tightly connected to the social relationships that learners, as social beings, intertwine with their surrounding context (Wertsch, 1985). Vygotsky's school generated Sociocultural Theory, which underlines the primary importance that mediation and social interaction play in the development of meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky, higher mental functions have a social origin and, in order to understand the individual, first it is necessary to understand the social relations that the individual intertwines (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). Therefore, knowledge is a social construct that individuals build while they interact with the surrounding environment and learning processes happen through participation in cultural, linguistic, and historically formed settings (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006a, 2006b; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

Vygotsky claimed that in child development all higher functions (including language development and the formation of concepts) occur twice, first at a social level (interpersonal) and then at an individual level (intrapersonal). This process, named "internalization" is made of several transformations and a "transformation of an interpersonal process into an intrapersonal one is a long series of developmental events" (1978:57). An important tenet of Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory is the ZPD. The ZPD is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978:86). In other words, the ZPD is the difference between what a child can achieve alone and what a child can achieve with the assistance of an expert or in collaboration with peers. For this reason, according to Vygotsky, the nature of human learning is social.

Vygotsky's notion of the ZPD stressed that mediation is fundamental to all human development including learning. Successful learning is strictly dependent on how learners

interact with their peers in order to solve problems they cannot overcome by themselves. At this point, the role of a mediator comes into play and helps learners move to the next stage of development. In order to describe the constant support provided by an expert to a learner, previous literature (Wood, et al., 1976) coined the term “scaffolding”, defined as an *“adult controlling those elements of the task that are essentially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence”* (p. 90). Even though Vygotsky never used the term “scaffolding” in his writing, the ZPD is directly associated with the concept of “scaffolding”. This mediator is called by Vygotsky the “more knowledgeable other” (MKO) (1975) and is normally thought of as being someone with a greater level of expertise such as a teacher, coach, or an older person, but it can also be a peer or a younger person.

Vygotsky considered language acquisition of a child as paradigmatic to explain the ZPD. He maintained that language is the tool initially adopted by the child in order to communicate with the surrounding environment. Then, gradually, the interaction with the adult environment and the cooperation with peers lead to the development of internal speech and to adult and independent thought (internalization). The child leaves the egocentric speech and develops the internal speech which occurs in adults (inside their mind). These higher mental processes are created after the child's social exposure to adults and peers (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985).

Although his work mainly focused on child's development processes, with its emphasis on the social construction of learning, Vygotsky provided the basis for sociocultural approaches to L2 learning. Some of the authors who applied Vygotsky's theory to the field of L2 learning (e.g. Kurata, 2011; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006a, 2006b), outlined that the key-concept of Sociocultural Theory is that the human mind is mediated and that humans make use of symbolic and physical tools when interacting with the external environment. One of the most important mediational tools is language. Lantolf and Thorne (2006a) declare that “language is the most pervasive and powerful cultural artifact that humans possess to mediate their connection to the world, to each other and to themselves” (p. 201). Following this view, L2 learning is socially constructed in and through social interaction, and social contexts are crucial for L2 learning.

Through social interaction, language becomes a cognitive tool for learners (Ohta, 2000). Social interaction shapes learners' agency in language processes (Belz, 2001; Lantolf, 2000; McGroarty, 1998). In other words, learners firstly consider the L2 as something external from themselves. Later, during the process of internalization, they start familiarizing themselves with the L2 as a tool of thought to employ in social interactions (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006b). The stronger the L2 internalization process, the more rewarding L2 learners' social participation will be and the more skilful they will be at regulating and mediating the interactions with their peers using the L2 as a cognitive resource (Kurata, 2011).

In relation to language learning, there are two different types of mediation. One is artifact mediation and corresponds to the tools used for learning (a textbook or a technological tool); the other form is social mediation, which coincides with discourse patterns, opportunities for interaction and assistance provided by MKOs in the ZPD (Donato & McCormick, 1994).

An interpretation of ZPD in the field of L2 learning is suggested by Ohta (1995), who defined it as "the distance between the L2 learner's developmental level as determined by independent language use, and the higher level of potential development as determined by how language is used in collaboration with a more capable interlocutor" (p. 96). In other words, ZPD in L2 learning consists in the gap between what L2 learners can do independently and what they can do with the assistance deriving from collaborative interaction. Basically, successful L2 learning and an online ZPD in the online communities occurs when learners' actions are mediated by the role of more capable peers using the TL. If each learner makes his contribution to a problem-solving activity, mutual aid leads to increased accuracy and higher performance in the TL (Kurata, 2011).

In AL, the literature has employed Sociocultural Theory and its core concepts (mediation and ZPD) in the field of CALL (Belz, 2002; Lee, 2004), focusing in particular on task-completion of closed-ended tasks (Myers, 2000; Storch, 2002a, 2002b, 2004), task completion of open-ended tasks (Tanaka, 2005), intercultural L2 learning (Pasfield-Neofitou, 2007a, 2007b); and on telecollaborative online interactions in SCMC situations (Belz & Kinginger, 2002; Kurata, 2011; Thorne, 1999; Thorne, 2003), which is what most concerns this study.

The ZPD has been applied to the data analysis of the online and offline interactions between learners to identify adjacency pairs (or segments) that include assistance that learners give or receive from more capable peers. In this way, it has been possible to explain experts' phatic utterances of encouragement addressed to novice learners, to analyse learners' changes in utterances after being given assistance and, more generally, to explore the co-construction of the metalinguistic talk and the construction of opportunities for L2 learning and use (Kurata, 2011). Kurata, for instance, shows excerpts of peer assistance under the sociocultural perspective of ZPD and how a learner, scaffolded by the NS, is able to overcome lexical and sociocultural challenges and to perform at a higher level than he would be able to do alone. She also demonstrates that when the NS's corrective feedback in the learners' ZPD does not affect negatively the learner's sense of self-worth and affirms his identity, this corrective feedback will not prevent the learner from constructing opportunities for L2 learning and use. All these issues will be relevant to the analysis made in Chapter 4, revolving around learners' online interaction in SCMC.

In this study, the notion of the ZPD will be applied in the settings of online communities to explain the assistance provided to learners so that they are able to achieve an increased level of competence in the L2. The ZPD applied in this study is the difference between the level of independent problem solving and the potential development of problem solving in collaboration with more capable peers in joint activity through imitation, support and interactions (Kinginger, 2002; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006a, 2006b; Thorne, 2009; Thorne, et al., 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). In relation to the concept of "scaffolding", previous literature has stressed that scaffolding clearly emerges in two basic patterns of communication: IRF (initiation-response-feedback) and IRE (initiation-response-evaluation). In both cases content and form are negotiated (Kinginger, 2002; Tanaka, 2005). This notion is meaningful in the context of online communities not only because it describes both expert-novice interaction (Donato, 1994) and novice-novice interaction (Wells, 1998), but also because if learners work together and sustain each other, they create a collaborative scaffold. Moreover, the IRF and IRE can generate even more insights in the case of textual online chats, where the medium itself determines "visual saliency" and synchronicity issues (Pellettieri, 2000; Tudini, 2010). Tudini, for instance, carried out an analysis of dyadic chat interactions between Australian learners of Italian and NSs and found that NSs may exercise some authority as expert speakers

through exposed correction and the launch of interpersonal and pedagogical correction. Moreover, it is the chat environment itself that fosters exposed corrections, thanks to the “visual saliency” (p.199) of errors, given that it is possible to scroll back in the conversation and “recast” a sentence or a word. In other words, visual saliency, which is a typical feature of the synchronous textual chat, allows NSs and especially NNSs to “notice” a trouble source turn. In addition, since the textual chat permits the interactants to split adjacency pairs, a delayed repair can occur after some turns (Liddicoat & Tudini, 2013). This feature allows learners to retrieve the previous utterances, to review it and to activate metalanguage thought, which has a certain potential for L2 learning. In the present study themes such as collaborative scaffold and visual saliency will be object of analysis in the chapter dedicated to learners’ informal online interactions (see Chapter 4).

2.2.2. Activity Theory applied to online communities for L2 learning

As I have outlined so far, the view that the language learner is a participating social agent in the SLA process (Block, 2003; Mills, 2011; Thorne & Payne, 2005) is grounded within theory. The examination of the social environment and the interactions in it is therefore fundamental for understanding L2 learners’ learning process. In this sense, CHAT (Leont’ev, 1978), retrieving Vygotsky’s idea of social mediation, further clarifies the relationship between agents/environment. In particular, it suggests that human behaviour results from the “integration of socially and culturally constructed forms of mediation into human activity” (Lantolf, 2000:8). For all these reasons, I considered CHAT, also abbreviated in AT, as a valuable tool to describe the dynamics generated within the online communities under exam.

The first generation of AT took Vygotsky’s (1981) idea of artifact-mediated and object-oriented action and reformulated it. Vygotsky was criticized by Leont’ev, one of his students, because he considered the object-oriented action mediated by cultural tools as a unit of analysis but he did not recognise the remarkable role played by other human beings and their social relations. Vygotsky’s follower, Leont’ev, took a step forward. The unit of analysis is practical activity, which is analysed at three hierarchical levels that influence each other. An activity is composed of a *subject* and an *object* mediated by *tools and artifacts*, and a subject is a person or a group involved in an activity, as illustrated by fig. 2.1:

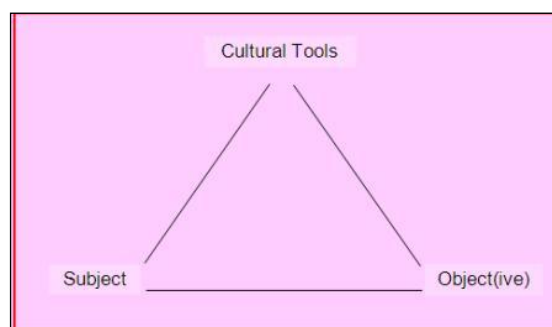


Fig. 2.1 Leont'ev's model of AT

The subject holds an object (conceived as “objective”, “motive”). The object motivates the activity and gives it a specific direction. The mediation can occur through the use of several types of tools, material tools as well as mental tools, such as culture, ways of thinking and language itself. Leont'ev also added three different levels with the intention to separate individual action from collective activity. The distinction between collective *activity* (1), group or individual *action* (2) and automatic *operation* (3) was added to integrate the idea of “mediation by other human beings and social relations” (Engeström & Mietinen, 1999:4). (1) The activity is linked to a motive, (2) the action is goal-directed and concerns the strategies used to attain a given goal and (3) the operation operationalizes motives into more specific objectives and observable levels of behaviour under the influence of concrete conditions.

Engeström (1987, 1999, 2001) extended AT by incorporating further the socially constructed context as part of an activity. The structure of his activity system embraces six elements: object, subject, tools, community, rules and division of labour. These elements are related to the three levels identified by Leont'ev (1978), e.g. collective activity, individual or group actions and routinized operations, as it is shown below:

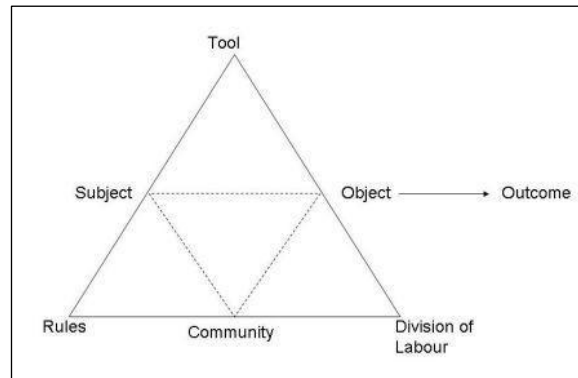


Fig. 2.2 Engeström's (1987) model of Activity Theory

As image 2.2 shows, in Engeström's (1987) model, the focus of the analysis is the relations between all the elements in the system. There are the *subject* (it can be an individual or a group), the *tools* and the *object*. The *tools* (or mediational artifacts) can be either technical and material or psychological and symbolic. They are the expression of the culture that created and transmitted them. They make their contribution to their transformation of the *object* into an *outcome*, which can also occur unexpectedly. Moreover, they mediate the relationship between the object of an activity and the *subject* (which can be the individual or a group). The tools can empower the subject but also limit his interaction with the object (Blin, 2005; Kuutti, 1996). Rather than in isolation, the subject is acting in a *community* that is oriented towards a common object(ive). Engeström distinguishes between the objective of an activity (which he names as *object*) and the objective of an action (which he defines as *goal*). Therefore, an activity is made of actions oriented towards specific goals. The objective of an activity (the *object*) is wider than the sum of the objectives of the actions (the *goals*) that constitute an activity. Moreover, the relationship between the subject and the object is mediated by a set of *rules* or norms that can be both explicit and implicit. In turn, the relationship between the community and the object is mediated by the *division of labour* between the participants in an activity.

Applying Engeström's (1987) model of AT to *Livemocha* and *Busuu* online communities (see 3.1.2 for an explanation about the selection of these communities), the AT triangle is the following:

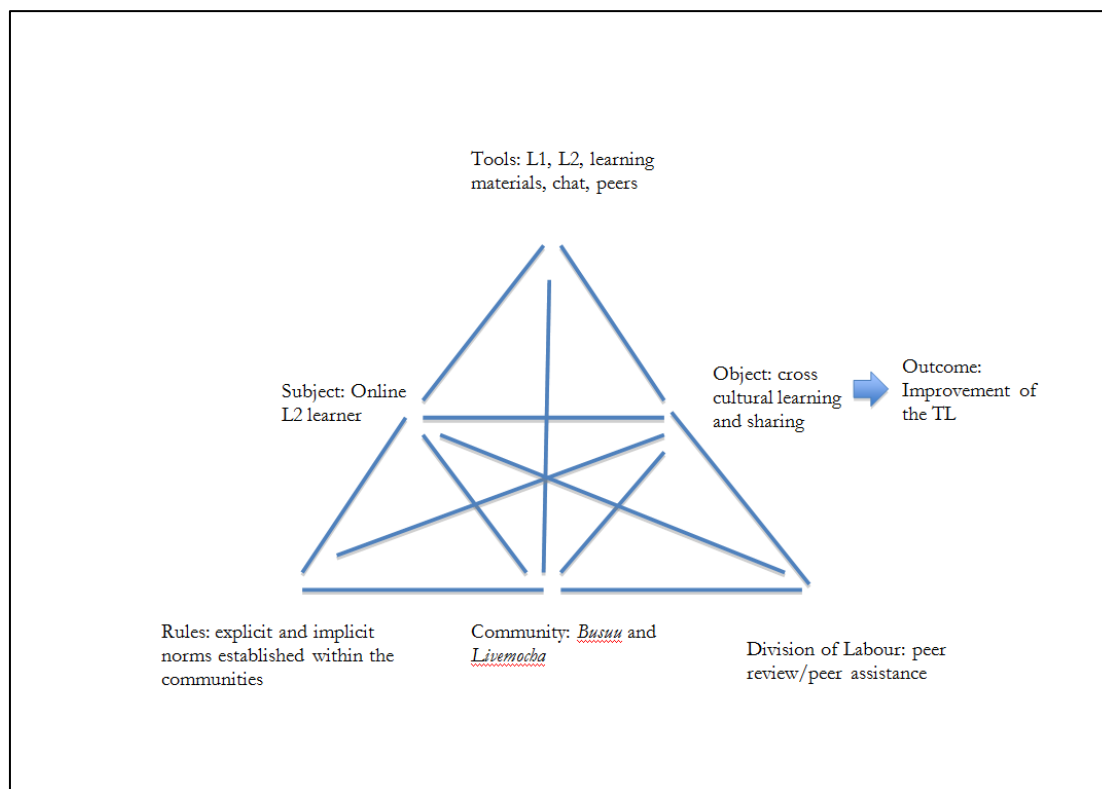


Fig. 2.3 The learning activity in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* communities adapted from Engeström's (1987) model

As image 2.3 illustrates, in this system the *subject* is the L2 learner conceived as a whole individual, considering his L1, his language background, a given TL level, if he studies the TL as an L2 or as a FL. The *tools* are represented by the technical and pedagogic affordances provided by the communities (the didactic materials, the learning units, the chat system, the flashcards system, etc), by the peers and by the languages themselves (L1 and/or L2). These tools are mediational artifacts between learners and the surrounding environment, they make their contribution to the transformation of the *object* into an *outcome*. In its website (<http://learn.livemocha.com>), *Livemocha* is advertised as such: “Learn a new language, practice with native speakers, and help create a new world without barriers!”. Similarly, one of *Busuu*'s (<http://www.busuu.com>) advertising sentences is: “Worldwide community, practise your language skills with our international community of over 50 million native speakers”.

According to their mission, the platforms have the *object(ive)* of putting into contact learners with NSs of their TL across the world and this would lead to the *outcome* of improving their TL, which can also occur unexpectedly and without learners being necessarily aware of their improvements. In turn, the learner (subject) is acting in an online community (community) that is oriented towards a common object(ive) that is, achieving

intercultural sharing and learning. Moreover, the learning content (tools) should mediate the relationship between learners (subject) and their cross cultural learning and sharing (object), which is the main aim of these communities, as advertised on their websites. The learning content (tools) empowers the learner but it can also limit the interaction of the learner with the object, that is, with learning and sharing with other NSs. Moreover, the relationship between learners (subject) and their cross cultural learning and sharing (object) is mediated by a set of norms (rules) that can be both explicit and implicit and have been established in the community. In turn, the relationship between these online platforms (communities) and cross cultural sharing and learning (object) is mediated by the exchanges, the opportunities of interactions and the peer assistance (division of labour) among the participants to the activity.

The application of AT to the analysis of *Busuu* and *Livemocha* as an example of online communities for language learners is expected to work as a powerful tool to verify if the way the online communities advertise themselves matches what their interfaces, environmental features and affordances actually allow for. The analysis can cover all the different elements of the triangle: by considering the triad subject-tools-object, it is possible to find out whether learners achieve their objectives in different ways, potentially making use of different tools to achieve specific goals. AT is also useful for analysing the motives and goals orienting learners and the possible presence of different and competing goals in the same learner or in relation to the learner's partner. Similarly, taking into account the relations among the poles subject-tools-community, it is possible to look at the social dimension of the activity. This triad regards the tools learners decide to adopt and the use they grant to these tools in order to contact other members of the community. Different orientations might imply different practices and different actions. Moreover, the triangle tools-community-object can help identify if the tools are truly capable of mediating the interactions between subjects and community and if they work towards the object of cross cultural learning and sharing. With reference to this triangle, it is possible to identify the types of relations established among members of the community and according to the type of tools used, to consider how these tools, working as mediational artifacts, influence the relationship between the learner and the other members, how learners took advantage of these tools as affordances and whether and how they pursued their objectives. In relation to the triangle subject-object-community, it is possible to underline if the object of the community developers matches with the object of learners.

In other words, three vertices of this triangle can help find out if learners' expectations, as promised by the online communities, are met. With respect to the triangle subject-rules-community, AT allows for the identification of the social rules and norms among learners when interacting during the dyadic conversations and with the community at large. AT can help recognize if there are shared rules among learners and how they perceive them. Finally, in relation to the triangle object-division of labour-community, at a macro level, AT can allow for the identification of different forms of collective practices that these online communities host. At a micro-level, that is, at the level of the dyadic interactions among learners, AT would make it possible to explain how (and if) the interactants agree on the expert and novice roles during the conversational episodes and how they divide each other's labour.

In her study about L2 learning in *Busuu*, Chotel (2012) adopted AT in order to explain the learning processes and the activities of three Chinese students in *Busuu* (see also chapter 1, 1.2.3). Chotel's study focused on the second generation of AT, on four poles (subject, object, community and tools) and on three triads: (1) subject-tools-objects, (2) subject-community-tools, (3) object-tools-community. By looking at the first triad, she was able to identify how learners make use of the tools in order to achieve their objectives; by looking at the second triad she found out what tools the learners and the rest of the community use to interact; and by looking at the third triad she discovered what kinds of relationships are established between learners and the members of the community through the chat tool. This study aimed to take advantage of the whole activity system and on the third generation developed by Engeström by tackling the other elements (division of labour-rules) of the triangle that had not been considered in previous studies. This will allow me to identify with more clarity the contradictions present in these online communities and in learners' pedagogical behaviours with their peers. Starting from the revision of the triads already analysed by Chotel (2012), this study will also tackle the two following triads: *subject-rules-community* and *object-division of labour-community*.

By analysing the first triad, *subject-rules-community*, I expect to identify the tacit or explicit rules that guide learners' spontaneous conversations in online communities. These rules regard when and how to take turns, assistance receiving and provision, and adequate peer feedback (micro level). The analysis of learners' online interactions in chapter 4 will cover these aspects and shed more light on this triad. These rules also concern the rating

system that helps learners give peer feedback, as suggested by the online platforms (macro level). Learners' perceptions elicited through online interviews will cover this aspect in chapter 3.

By analysing the second triad, *object-division of labour-community*, I expect to identify with more clarity how work is distributed among learners in the community and if there are internal tensions in the system (macro level). At a micro level, AT will be a valuable tool to analyse learners in their online interactions. In particular, I will observe how and if learners define their roles and their tasks of expert and novice of the TL during their online conversations.

In addition, Engeström (1987, 1999, 2001) suggests that AT may be described with the help of five main principles. These principles, applied to the online communities under exam, are expected to reveal more insights into their dynamics. The five principles formulated by Engeström are:

(1) The first principle is that a collective activity system has to be seen in its *network relations* to other activity systems, and that this interactivity has to be taken as the prime unit of analysis (Engeström, 1987; 2001: 136). In other words, it is possible to interpret all the elements of the triangle only if the surrounding context and other activity systems are taken into account, such as participation in a formal online course. The activity system of *Livemocha* and *Busuu* has to be seen in its relation to other activity systems, and this interactivity has to be taken as the prime unit of analysis. The online system is in relation with the L2 offline activity system and the non-formal learning activity system is in relation with a possible formal learning activity system. These systems are intertwined and inevitably influence each other. This augmented level of complexity can lead the system to problems but it can also turn into a source of innovation.

(2) The second principle is the *multi-voicedness* of an activity system. An activity system is always a community of multiple points of view and perspectives. Individual subjects construct the object of an activity in different and sometimes conflicting ways. The division of labour in an activity generates different positions because each participant has his own cultural background and personal history. Therefore, within the system, artifacts, rules and conventions in all likelihood will carry all this plurality and polyphony. The

multi-voicedness of a system becomes even more complex if different activity systems interact. This increased level of complexity can lead the system to problems but it can also turn into a source of innovation. The literature has applied this principle to the sphere of language learning “for understanding the nature of the relationship between real individuals and languages other than their first” (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001: 143) and to explain that L2 learners motives and goals towards the TL are shaped by their own personal histories (Blin, 2005; Gillette, 1994). AT will be applied to this study also through the principle of the multi-voicedness of “online L2 networkers”. *Livemocha* and *Busuu* activity system are communities of multiple points of view and perspectives. Each learner is expected to have different objectives and to carry out different actions to achieve these objectives. Considering that L2 learners have their own cultural background and personal history, which shape their different goals and motives, this principle will help achieve a better understanding of the division of labour in learners’ activity and of the different positions they take on in the communities.

(3) The third principle is *historicity*. Activity systems can transform over time, taking on a different shape. For this reason, an accurate study of an activity system’s history (considering tools, ideas, objects, procedures, etc.) is important to understand eventual problems that might occur (Engeström, 1987; 2001: 136). To this regard, Blin (2005) illustrates the historical evolution of language teaching pedagogy drawing out the changes that occurred in this activity system over time, as new mediums were introduced, for instance. Considering L2 learning in online communities as an activity system, it is of value to study the evolution of the community’s norms and rules, from their first appearance and in relation to the current landscape of other language activity systems, in order to identify eventual affordances and constraints. It is also useful to identify how the two communities changed over time and whether they were able to adjust these changes to better suit learners’ needs.

(4) The fourth principle is the central role of *contradictions* “as sources of change and development”. Contradictions are not meant as problems or conflicts but as “historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems”. (Engeström, 1987; 2001: 137). Activities are open systems and therefore can adopt new elements from the outside such as new technology. When this happens, some older elements such as the division of labour might resent this change. Contradictions can bring disturbances

in the system but, at the same time, innovate it. In the case of L2 learning activities, contradictions can derive from the presence of different language departments adopting different teaching methodologies (grammar-translation approach vs task-based approach) (Blin, 2005). The application of this principle to the realm of the online community selected for this study is expected to shed more light on the internal contradictions and tensions in the system, taking into account their pedagogical, social and technical affordances.

(5) The fifth principle is related to the previous one and deals with the *expansive cycles* of “qualitative transformations” (Engeström, 1987; 2001: 137) within a system:

As the contradictions of an activity system are aggravated, some individual participants begin to question and deviate from its established norms. In some cases, this escalates into collaborative envisioning and a deliberate collective change effort. An expansive transformation is accomplished when the object and motive of the activity are reconceptualized to embrace a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of the activity. (Engeström, 2001: 137)

This means that the system acquires a new arrangement and “new structures” (Engeström, 1999: 32). Activity systems move through cycles of transformations in response to emerging contradictions within the AT system or between two or more AT systems. This would happen if the language teacher decided to move away from the traditional, pre-established language practices and started to introduce new artifacts in order to better address learners’ needs, followed by the surrounding language teaching community. After a period of imbalance, the new practices would stabilise themselves and give rise to a new cycle of transformation (Blin, 2005). The “qualitative transformation” in the system of online communities is ongoing. Since online communities are a phenomenon in constant evolution, new online L2 learning practices might unexpectedly emerge, establish and start a new cycle. Expansive cycles generate expansive learning (Engeström, 1987). Expansive learning takes place when learners deviate from standard rules and procedures and acquire new practices by expanding their previous activities. For instance, a development occurs when learners have the opportunity to present the outcomes of what they have learned to their peers, to teach and explain strategies. The “qualitative transformation” in the system of online communities relate to the establish-

ing of new practices for online L2 learning and the introduction of new artifacts by adopting different tools.

As one could deduce, AT and its principles can be applied to any context, included language learning and teaching. With reference to this study, AT will be used not only to draw out the structure of the online communities and their main dynamics (macro level), but also the learners' interactions (micro level). At the micro level of the online interactions, AT will be a valuable theoretical framework to study language learners' strategies and learner autonomy in the L2. The learner activates a particular strategy (object-oriented learner activity) to carry out a task (goal-directed action) under given conditions (the situation automatizes or de-automatizes strategic actions) (Donato & McCormick, 1994:455). An example could be the learner's preference of contextual clues rather than the dictionary to discern the meaning of a text that is unexpectedly too semantically and syntactically complex (Blin, 2005; Donato & McCormick, 1994; Thorne, 2004).

Furthermore, AT retrieves the notion of L2 learner's agency as a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual as well as with the social context. Human agency is co-constructed given particular sociocultural environments. Therefore, L2 learners are not passive, but active agents that shape their learning experiences autonomously (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006a, 2006b; McKey & Wong, 1996; Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995). Students' performance necessarily depends on individual and social factors. In this sense, AT can be used to understand how learners engage in their L2 activities through interactions with others and how they develop their participation in the activity under specific situated contexts (Kurata, 2011).

AT will also work as a valuable conceptual model to conceive the use of L1 and/or L2 as resources, as mediational artifacts to organise the on-going discourse (Kurata, 2011: 120-121) or to seek assistance (133) in both offline social networks and online conversations, which is what concerns most this study. The adoption of AT as an underpinning framework permitted Kurata (2011) to explain the division of labour and the social roles and norms among learners while they are interacting in their informal social networks. It also allowed a deeper investigation on learners' goal-driven strategies in their learning experience and the possible incompatibility of two goals (i.e. grammar accuracy vs self-

confidence in speaking the L2) or two motives (socialization vs language learning) (Kurata, 2011). For all these reasons, as the following chapters will show, it is considered to be a valuable tool when applied to the context of online communities for L2 learning and to the micro-analysis of learners' online interactions, which will be the object of the analysis carried out in chapter 4.

2.2.3. Learner autonomy and online communities for L2 learning

SNSs and social media in general have been considered as powerful drivers for learner autonomy, independence and the development of critical thinking, because they allow learners to create and express themselves online freely, to author their own content and to share that content with other peers in the TL (Godwin-Jones, 2006; Halvorsen, 2009). Since this study revolves around lifelong L2 learners' activities and behaviours within online communities for L2 learning, that is, in non-formal and informal environments, the concept of learner autonomy is essential for a better understanding of the dynamics generated in these communities. Therefore, this section is dedicated to a discussion of the concept of learner autonomy, with a particular emphasis on lifelong learning and online communities.

In Holec (1981)'s definition, autonomy means "to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 4) and it means that learners autonomously "assume responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes" (p. 3). Ten years after Holec's definition, Little expanded this definition by taking into account learner's psychology and considering autonomy as an attribute of the learner more than of the learning situation: "autonomy in language learning depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action (Little, 1991:4). The notion of autonomy has been linked by Little (1991) to the spontaneous behaviour of an individual who freely decides to join a community to establish relationships of reciprocity.

As Villanueva, Ruiz-Madrid and Luzón (2010) point out, the concept of autonomy in the field of L2 learning should be regarded as an "attitude" or as a "philosophy" (p.4). Moreover, they underline that this notion should be linked to the socio-constructivism of Vygotsky (1978), which emphasizes the interplay among action, thought and language and the link between the cognitive and the social dimension. Autonomy is developmen-

tal (Blin, 2004). Under the lens of Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Self-determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), this means that autonomy has to be practised and trained through the help of more capable peers in the ZPD. As Ushioda (2006) remarks, the “social environment supports learners’ sense of autonomy and intrinsic motivation to pursue optimal challenges through the zone of proximal development” (p.15). The autonomy process “is a balancing act between the person and the environment” (Eneau & Develotte, 2012, p. 6).

Moreover, the concept of autonomy is tightly associated with the concept of heteronomy (Morin, 1990), that is, you develop autonomy in conditions of collaboration and cooperation with others and this is particularly true in the case of language learning. In other words, an autonomous learner should be more “interdependent” than “independent” (Little, 1991). The development of autonomy requires time and is regarded as an ongoing process that is socially mediated when learners gather and discuss socratically. In this sense, learning is heuristic, that is, it is a process of progressive discovery and reflection with other people.

The concept of autonomy is often confused with self-learning. However, while it is possible for self-learning to promote learner autonomy, it is also true that it often fails to provide successful results. Autonomy is much more complex because it involves learners’ ability to manage and orientate their behaviours after having become aware of their learning process. In adult L2 learners autonomy is a developing process involving sharing and exchanges and is tightly related to the development of what the literature defines as “meta-skills” (Eneau & Develotte, 2012) which are (1) the ability “to know oneself as a learner” and to be aware of one’s personal style of learning, (2) the “reflective” capacity of learning through action, (3) the capacity to “adapt” to the situation and the context, the capacity to “learn from others”.

The concept of autonomy has been revisited in recent years because it has acquired an even more complex understanding in the realm of new technologies, which have deconstructed the traditional dimension of the formal class and have introduced a more blurred distinction between in-class and out-of-class practices (Benson, 2006). This occurs because social media, as I mentioned in chapter 1 (see 1.1.1), are thought to empower the users, in the sense that they have more control over the hyper-textual content

written in the TL and become content creators. However, we cannot assume that the use of technology automatically results in an autonomous learner. Learner autonomy is not simply a set of skills to learn but a complex ongoing process that involves the learner's whole self (Little, 2004).

When dealing with autonomy in online language learning communities it is necessary to be cautious. Before assuming that group collaboration in online communities represents a new way of learning that challenges traditional methods, we must consider the following. On the one hand, on the Internet and in online communities in particular, the opportunity to encounter experts or more capable peers with the same interests is enhanced. On the other hand, what online language learning communities primarily offer is mainly a set of resources for learners to study and work on their own in the TL. In other words, online language learners in these communities are often studying in conditions of self-learning and inhabit an informal environment that aims to reflect non-formal and more formal environments but this does not necessarily mean that they are autonomous learners.

For this reason, when conducting a study on online learners in online communities, it is important to consider that online language learners are lifelong learners who need to develop their autonomous skills at many levels: personal, cognitive and socio-interactive. Learner autonomy and these three levels acquire even more value in our complex world of instantaneous communication and ubiquitous information, where many multilanguage links can be intertwined every day. Learner autonomy is considered essential to succeed in the information age and consists in knowing what strategies to adopt to have easy access to both online and offline tools (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000), to be able to select and criticize the overwhelming amount of information present in the web, to think deeply, to make decisions for one's own learning, to reconstruct understanding, to take risks when talking with language partners, to use language strategies consciously, to make use of noticing and mimicking, to develop metacognitive skills, and to learn actively from one's partners (Mynard, 2004, 2011).

The principle of autonomy, together with the principle of reciprocity, is at the basis of tandem language learning, which occurs when two learners start a regular partnership with the two-fold objective of learning each other's mother tongue and helping their

partner achieve this objective. The reciprocity occurs when, during the interaction, the two partners feel that the exchange is balanced and that both of them are benefiting equally. Esch (1996) uses the term “shareability” to underline that both learners are benefiting in equal shares, while Brammerts (1996:11) talks about the “reciprocal dependence” of the partners and their “mutual support”. The principle of autonomy is tightly connected to the principle of reciprocity and it states that learners must take responsibility for their own learning. Learners can do it in two different ways: 1. By reflecting on one’s TL learning process and 2. By taking control of the content and context of further contact with the TL in order to maximise the learning benefits (Appel, 1999). Little (1991:4) defines learner’s autonomy as the “capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action”. This principle, as I mentioned, is commonly and wrongly associated with self-learning but it is actually something that goes beyond this. Autonomy takes place when the two learners involved in the exchange “alone determine what they want to learn and when, and they can only expect from their partner the support that they themselves have defined and asked for” (Brammerts, 1996:11).

In relation to learner autonomy in online communities for L2 learning, research is still in its infancy but it is providing important insights. Self-learning in online communities has been analysed by previous literature (Chotel, 2012; Chotel & Mangenot, 2011), with focus on the coaching of self-directed and social learning offered in these environments. Previous research has examined the extent to which online communities for L2 learning are able to offer self-learning in a more social and cognitive dimension and whether this favours learner autonomy or impedes it. The results showed that learners’ autonomy is taken for granted by the websites rather than being developed through the activities and communication tools. The websites neither provide relevant advice nor human expert coaching to sustain self-directed and social learning.

The concept of learner autonomy will orientate the present study in order to achieve a better understanding of the extent to which learners promote their autonomy in these communities by the examination of the strategies learners enact for creating and developing their network of friends, for tightening their bonds with their contacts, for creating a language partnership, for widening their learning context (Mynard, 2004) and for creating opportunities for metacognition and the use of the TL during their online exchanges (Mynard 2004; Kurata, 2011).

2.3. SCMC and online interactions

The previous sections described Sociocultural Theory, AT and the concept of learner autonomy, which are expected to help clarify the macro context surrounding learners' activities and behaviours within the online communities, as well as learners' actions and the relationships between object, rules, community, subject and division of labour. These theories and concepts, at the same time, will also be a valuable aid for a micro level analysis of learners' informal online interactions because they are expected to generate more insights on the different forms of peer assistance and strategies for L2 use enacted by learners. Micro-level means to examine the micro-interactional factors affecting learners' conversations. The following sections will describe other conceptual tools and will present other important theoretical bases on which this study relies on for the micro-analysis of learners' online interactions (see Chapter 4). Section 2.3.1 will describe the theories and the criteria that will be adopted for the micro-analysis of the interactions, and also the taxonomy in use to define different forms of peer assistance. Section 2.3.2 will describe the procedures that will be adopted to analyse learners' processes of language selection.

2.3.1. Criteria and taxonomy for the micro-analysis of the online interactions

Investigation in telecollaborative exchanges has been so far dominated by both sociocultural approaches and interactionist models, which are paradigmatically opposed. Sociocultural approaches are mainly qualitative. They put emphasis on the social aspects of language learning (situated learning), on the language as a mediating tool between the subject and the environment, and on the importance of contextualizing the conversational episodes. On the other hand, interactionist approaches are mainly quantitative. They look at the mental processes behind SLA, and represent language learning as interactional events taking place in isolation, where individuals negotiate meaning during the exchanges.

The present study pays attention to the settings, to the participants of the interactions and to the figure of the learner within the activity system. For all these reasons, this study is intrinsically based on a sociocultural model. However, solely for the purpose of the micro-analysis of learners' online interactions based on CA (see case studies in chapter 4), the study will rely on a terminology in part based on an interactionist model. In inter-

actionist approaches to SLA, quantitative methods are usually favoured because they allow for objectivity. Therefore, in this thesis, the interactionist terminology, which is more objective, will better allow for the coding of instances of peer feedback and negotiation of meaning. Combining portions of the interactionist model with the sociocultural model is justified as the hybrid, complex and fuzzy realm of online exchanges, involving multiple dimensions is suited to a complex theoretical frameworks and “multidisciplinary approach” (Dooly & O’Dowd, 2012:27). In addition, when two opposite paradigms converge, the methodology is improved and strengthened (E. Tudini, personal communication, 10 December 2013)¹⁵ and a multi-perspective analysis is favoured (Foster & Ohta, 2005). As Foster and Ohta (2005) underline, it is possible to imply that what in Sociocultural Theory is within the ZPD, under an interactionist perspective “is within the learner’s reach, but not yet fully incorporated into the learner’s linguistic system” (p. 414).

In addition, for the purpose of the analysis, more specific terminology is necessary. Drawing in part on Ware & O’Dowd (2008), the analysis will consider two typologies of feedback:

- affective feedback
- corrective feedback (which can be exposed or embedded)

Affective feedback is provided by the teacher or by a more expert learner and it encourages or discourages learners through the use of an affective vocabulary. Studies on affective feedback in SCMC (Black, 2007; Lam, 2004) have pointed out its benefits for language socialization.

Corrective feedback is provided by the teacher or by a more expert learner and it helps the learner reach a more target-like form in the TL. Previous studies found out that such type of feedback in online exchanges has a potential for language development (Sauro, 2009; Ware & O’Dowd, 2008). With regard to corrective feedback, this study will also look at exposed and embedded corrections (Jefferson, 1987). Moreover, corrective feed-

¹⁵ Malerba, M. L. (2014). An Interview with Dr. Vincenza Tudini from the University of South Australia. *Bellaterra Journal of Teaching & Learning Language & Literature*, 7(1), 88–96. Retrieved from <http://revistes.uab.cat/jtl3/article/view/555/630>

back focuses on morphosyntactic, phonological or lexical aspects. The following table displays how peer feedback is classified for the purpose of the analysis.

Table 2.1 Classification of peer feedback for the analysis

| Levels of peer feedback | | Example from the online interactions |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Corrective EMBEDDED It consists in implicit indirect feedback not to interrupt the conversational flow (Gass, 1997; Tudini, 2010).</p> | <p>LEXICAL It triggers a repair sequence due to a non target-like form in the use of a vocabulary. It generates word search and word explanation.</p> | <p><u>From the oral chat</u> L: Yes. I encargar (1), I enchar... (2) I asked for a turkey. NS: Ah you order...ordered one.</p> |
| | <p>MORPHOSYNTACTIC It triggers a repair sequence due to a non target-like form of parts of speech and syntax.</p> | <p><u>From the oral chat</u> L:[Ah sí] el viernes... porque no podemos [podíamos] (this Spanish verbal form does not exist) <i>[Ah yeah] last Friday...because we [couldn't</i> NS: [Claro. <i>[Exactly.</i> L: hablar. <i>talk.</i> NS: No pudimos hablar <i>We couldn't talk</i> L: No... <i>No...</i> NS: No pudimos hablar porque yo te mandé el mail y me acosté porque me sentía muy mal <i>We couldn't talk because I sent you the email and I went to bed since I was very sick</i></p> |
| | <p>PHONOLOGICAL It triggers a repair sequence due to a non target-like form related to the sound system of a language.</p> | <p><u>From the textual chat</u> L: "well it's funny but I also like hills))) even though I'm tall sometimes I wear it)))" NS: "hahaha" NS: "yes, heels are nice too))"</p> |
| <p>Corrective EXPOSED It consists in explicit direct feedback, it is more face-threatening and it usually interrupts the intersubjectivity (Gass, 1997; Tudini, 2010).</p> | <p>LEXICAL</p> | <p><u>From the textual chat</u> NS: "i have a sweet tooth sometimes L: you mean toothpaste? NS: LOL! NS: noooo L: so what did you mean? NS: a sweet tooth; its when you have a gigantic urge for sweets"</p> |

| | | |
|---|-----------------|--|
| | MORPHOSYNTACTIC | <p><u>From the textual chat</u></p> <p>A: ti fa male quel dente che devi riparare? <i>Is that tooth that you have to repair hurting?</i></p> <p>A: ma devi riparare tante denti [Intended: “tanti”] <i>but you have to repair many teeth</i></p> <p>A: tante <i>many</i></p> <p>B: no, non mi fa male ma il dentista mi ha detto che dovrebbe ripararlo più presto possibile <i>no, it's not hurting but the dentist told me that he should repair it as soon as possible</i></p> <p>A: capito <i>I see</i></p> <p>B: tantI denti <i>many teeth</i></p> <p>A: hai ragione, grazie per la correzione. <i>You're right. Thanks for the correction.</i></p> |
| | PHONOLOGICAL | <p><u>From the oral chat</u></p> <p>L: “I never cooked turkey before and some American friends give me several recipes” [pronounced as /re'saips/]</p> <p>NS: “recipes” [pronounced as /'resəpiz/]</p> |
| <p>Affective It employs affective language to bestow praise or criticism on learners' performance. In SCMC it is signalled by the use of the emoticons (Lu & Law, 2011)</p> | Not applicable | <p><u>From the textual chat</u></p> <p>NS: “LOL”</p> <p>NS: “its ok”</p> <p>NS: “ i was confused at first (rofl)”</p> |

As the table shows, the analysis will consider the evidence of the two typologies of peer feedback (corrective and affective). In addition, three different levels of corrective feedback (morphosyntactic, phonological and lexical) will be considered and two different types of correction (embedded and exposed).

Then, the study will examine instances of negotiation of meaning drawing on Foster and Ohta (2005), who adopted a hybrid interactionist and sociocultural model. The analysis of the online interactions will follow a hybrid taxonomy as well, as synthesized in table 2.2:

Table 2.2 Taxonomy for the analysis of the online interactions

| LRE (interactionist) | Definition | Example from the online interactions (see chapter 4) |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| Comprehension check | “Comprehension checks consist of moves through which one speaker attempts to determine whether the other has understood a preceding utterance (e.g. <i>Do you understand?. Should I repeat that for you?</i>)” (Pica, 1987: 18, original emphasis). | <p><u>From the textual chat</u></p> <p>L: “ah...ok.. I'm sorry” NS: “you get it now?”</p> |
| Confirmation check | “Confirmation checks consist of moves by which one speaker seeks to confirm the other's preceding utterance through repetition, with rising intonation of all or part of the utterance.” (Pica, 1987: 18) | <p><u>From the oral chat</u></p> <p>L: “Herramientos” NS: “Herramientas (1) tools, ¿no?”</p> |
| Clarification request | “Clarification requests consist of moves by which one speaker seeks assistance in understanding the other speaker's preceding utterance through questions (e.g., <i>What do you mean?</i>), statements (<i>I don't understand</i>), and imperatives such as <i>Please repeat.</i> ” (Pica, 1987: 18, original emphasis). | <p><u>From the oral chat</u></p> <p>L: “...que tomar (1)¿"tile" [pronounced as /ta11/? ¿"Tile" es, no? "Tile" (2) ahí ¿cómo era? (2)¿ infusión? ¿Tile tea? ¿Herb tea?” <i>...to take "tile" (1) [pronounced as /ta11/? It's "Tile" ins'tit? "Tile" (2) oh, how was it? (2) infusion? Tile tea? Herbal tea?</i></p> <p>NS: “¿Perdón?” (<i>bbb</i>) <i>Sorry?</i></p> |
| LRE (sociocultural) | Definition | Example from the online interactions (see chapter 4) |
| Self-correction | It is defined as “self-initiated, self-repair, and occurs when learner corrects his or her own utterance without being prompted to do so by another person.” (Foster & Ohta, 2005:420). | <p><u>From the oral chat</u></p> <p>L: “you know how to say the way of (1)"saludarse"? How do you say it? Of (.) ayuda (.) greeting! It's a way of greeting.”</p> |
| Other-correction | It “involves a peer correcting his or her partner.” (Foster & Ohta, 2005:420). | <p><u>From the oral chat</u></p> <p>NS: <Saludo>. “Saludo” es el nombre y “saludar” el verbo. <i>“Saludo” is the noun and “saludar” the verb.</i></p> |
| Co-construction | It is defined as “the joint creation of an utterance, whether one person completes what another has begun, or whether various people chime in to create an utterance. Co-constructions are seen as allowing learners to participate in forming utterances that they cannot complete individually, building language skills in the process.” (Foster & Ohta, 2005:420). | <p><u>From the oral chat</u></p> <p>L: “Qué susto”...es...“was freegthen” [intended “how frightening”] ¿no? Como “what a scare” ¿no? <i>“Qué susto”...is...“was freegthen” isn'tit? It's like “what a scare” isn't it?</i></p> <p>NS: Frightening...frightening. L: Frightening. NS: Yeah. L: Frightening NS: Yeah yeah.</p> |

| | | |
|------------|---|--|
| | | L: Because you don't know (.) you don't say "what a scare", no? NS: No, you say "how frightening". |
| Continuers | "They function to express an interlocutor's interest in what the speaker is saying and to encourage the speaker to go on." (Foster & Ohta, 2005:420). | <u>From the textual chat</u> NS:"so about Russian? you want to know some, right?" L:"yesssss" |

As the table shows, language related episodes (LREs) will be used as units of analysis. These are defined by Swain and Lapkin (1998) as “any part of a dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others” (p. 326). Then, the analysis will be conducted on LREs under an interactionist and a sociocultural perspective.

Under an interactionist perspective, the analysis will look at the “three Cs” model, comprehension checks, clarification requests and confirmation checks, as defined by Pica (1987), who adapted these definitions from Long (1980). While in Long’s definition the interlocutor is a NS, in Pica’s definition the subject is a general speaker and can include both a NNS expert of the TL and a novice of the TL. This choice is more consistent with the current analysis and with the complex conversational situations that I expect to find in the online environments of this study.

From a sociocultural perspective, the descriptors for the analysis refer to learning as a process that is co-constructed between peers. These descriptors are self-correction, other-correction, co-construction and continuers (Foster & Ohta, 2005). Indeed, given the sociocultural theoretical framework of this study, all the aforementioned theories explained since the beginning of this chapter will be applied to this analysis.

The micro-analysis will be carried out on learners’ dyadic conversations because in the online communities for L2 learning, learners’ interactions occur in pairs according to the modalities typical of tandem language learning. The interactional episodes analysed will cover the following situations:

- **Learner- NS conversations**
- **Learner- NNS conversations**

- **Learners' textual conversations**
- **Learners' spoken conversations**

Finally, for the purpose of the analysis, Gass' (1997) SLA interactionist model will be applied to the online interactions between learners. Gass' model consists of five stages:

1. Input/apperceived input. The learner notices a gap in his knowledge of the TL.
2. Comprehended input. The learner replaces the old knowledge with the new one.
3. Intake. The learner incorporates the new knowledge and stores it for future integration.
4. Integration. The learner transforms the input into active knowledge.
5. Output. The learners test the new acquired linguistic knowledge.

Markee (2000) applied Gass' (1997) longitudinal model to “cross-sectional data to account for learning on a moment-by-moment basic” (Markee, 2000:135). His application of Gass' model allowed him to find evidence of the 5 stages (apperceived input, comprehended input, intake, integration and output) and to make them more “observable” (p.135) by means of a CA approach. Markee (2000) applied Gass' (1997) model to face-to-face conversations between teachers and learners in classroom settings and found that this model was meaningful for cross-sectional data and moment-by-moment descriptions as well as for longitudinal descriptions.

Similarly to Markee (2000), Tudini (2010) applied Gass' (1997) model to online dyadic interactions in semi-instructional contexts outside the classroom, that is, not in specific pedagogical tasks, but as part of the assessment conditions and requirements established by the teacher. Tudini proved that Gass' model can be a valuable tool if applied to the micro-analysis of the online interactions in CA terms.

I decided elaborate this further and apply Gass' model to the dyadic online interactions among learners belonging to the online communities for L2 learning. In this context, the informal online interactions between L2 learners are even more natural and spontaneous because they occur in the absence of teachers, pedagogical tasks and formal assessment.

In order to ensure consistency and precision in the analysis, central issues related to CA, which are relevant to intercultural online talk (Tudini, 2010) will be taken into consideration and the terminology will reflect these decisions. These central issues are related to:

- The establishment of roles and social norms between interactants (Kurata, 2011; Tudini, 2010)
- Turn-taking as a means to construct opportunities for the use of the TL in an online intercultural context (Kurata, 2011)
- Pedagogical repair sequences (Van Lier, 1988), which in SLA in social interactionism is known as “negotiation of meaning” and refers to the interruption of the flow of the conversations for learners to achieve mutual understanding (Gass & Varonis, 1985)
- Adjacency pairs, the way learners organize the clusters of discourse (Tudini, 2010)
- The management of both social and pedagogical trajectories during the dyadic conversations. In other words their ability to engage in pedagogical activity while maintaining intersubjectivity during the interaction (Tudini, 2010)

The next section is devoted to another crucial issue in the analysis of online interactions, which is language selection.

2.3.2. Language selection in SCMC situations

When analysing learners’ online interactions in the communities (chapter 4), this study will illustrate how learners decide to employ the L1 or the L2 or to switch between them in a strategic way.

Before discussing this issue more in depth, it is essential to provide a generic definition of code-switching, to explain the model adopted for this study and to provide a brief review of some of the main practices revolving around SCMC and language selection.

The term code-switching¹⁶, that is, the alternation of two languages in a written text or in a conversation, has been discussed in a wide variety of fields ranging from formal lin-

¹⁶ Scholars do not share a common spelling for this word. It can be written as code switching as two separate words, codeswitching as a single word or code-switching with the hyphen. My personal preference is to spell code-switching in the hyphenated way to convey the idea of a single word consisting of the com-

guistics, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics to philosophy and anthropology. In this thesis I will rely on the definitions adopted by sociocultural linguistics because, being this an interdisciplinary area involving languages, culture and society (Bucholz & Hall, 2005), it will be a valuable aid for the description of the learner's linguistic practices in relation to online communities.

This study, in particular, adopts Auer's view about code-switching and his model of Bilingual Conversation, which developed from Gumperz's (1982) interactional approach to code-switching and which draws on CA.

Auer, with his model of bilingual conversation (1984), pioneered studies on interaction and code-switching (Nilep, 2006). In Auer's (1999) definition code-switching occurs when "the juxtaposition of two codes (languages) is perceived and interpreted as a locally meaningful event by participants" (p. 310). What is important to underline is that code-switching consists in the "meaningful" and "contextualizing" (p.311) contrast between one code (or language) and another enacted by participants "to convey meaning"; it can depend either on the situation (discourse-related) or on the speakers (participant-related).

Unlike Gumperz and Blom (1972), according to Auer (1984), language choice is not determined by a pre-existing situation or a pre-established norm, but is the interaction itself. For Auer, when participants are interacting and producing utterances, the process of negotiation among participants creates a meaningful social event and social meaning. While Gumperz and Blom (1972) and Myers-Scotton (1993) adopted a macro-approach orientation to code-switching, Auer (1984) was concerned with speakers' interactions under a micro-level perspective. He explored the sequentiality and embeddedness of code-switching in conversation rather than considering pre-existing rules (macro-level) to determine the language choice (Nilep, 2006). For this reason, the micro-approach researchers relied on CA to approach code-switching in order to focus on the sequences of turns in the conversation.

bination of two elements. I will maintain this spelling throughout this thesis. However, I will maintain the original spelling in the quotations. Furthermore, another problem with the definition of code-switching is the word "code" itself and its exact meaning. "Code" does not mean simply "language", but it has been used as a synonym for "linguistic variety" including a language, dialect, style or register (Alvarez-Cáccamo, 2000:112; Nilep, 2006).

Auer conducted several analyses (1984, 1988, 1995, 1998) of Italian migrants in Germany switching from southern Italian dialects to German or vice versa and found that code-switching was “embedded in the sequential development of the conversation” (1984:93). In other words, code alternation among participants during their interactions had to be considered as a contextualization cue because it shaped and influenced the context and the interaction in itself. Moreover, he distinguished between “discourse-related” and “participant-related” code-switching (1988). The former occurs when “the language alternation in question” is “providing cues for the *organization of the ongoing interaction*”, while the latter is dependent on the “*attributes of the speaker*” (Auer, 1988:192; italics in the text). In other words, discourse-related code-switching functions as a contextualization cue and indicates shifts in the topic of conversation or changes of the people attending the conversation. Instead, participant-related code-switching is related to the speakers’ preference and/or language proficiency in a given language.

Beyond being related to the social meaning underlying the use of different languages in multilingual communities (Alfonzetti, 1998; Gumperz, 1982; Sebba Wootton, 1998), code-switching for Auer (1988, 1999) has to be analysed in its sequential position during the interaction itself (while speakers orient the dialogue towards their language preferences) because it is in the conversation that it acquires value and significance.

Code-switching has been analyzed in SLA studies to explore bilingual speakers and L2 learners’ practices in language selection both inside (Cenoz & Genesee, 2001; Fotos, 2001; Liebscher & Dailey-O’Cain, 2005; Romaine, 1989; Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005; Volk & Angelova, 2007) and outside classrooms (Holtzer, 2002; Kasper, 2004; Kurata, 2011; Masuda, 2009). Here I will focus on the second strand (outside classroom practices) because it is more pertinent to the non-formal context of this investigation.

Studies outside the classroom settings focused on the socio-interactional meaning of code-switching. Kasper (2004) for instance, relied on a CA approach to examine dyadic conversations between a beginner learner of German and an NS of German who also was a proficient user of English. She discovered that the learner used his L1 as a device to gain more opportunities to use the L2 and that the L1 played an important role enabling the learner to be interactive without disrupting the flow of the conversation. Holtzer (2002) explored code-switching in a non-formal setting, a language learning program,

Scotlang, which involved informal telephone conversations between Scottish learners of French and French learners of English. She attributed the code-switching to learners' misunderstandings since it was employed as a resource to solve communication problems. Masuda (2009) provided a more detailed account of learners' code-switching by applying Auer's model in the informal context of Japanese-English language exchanges in Australia. She claimed that L1 selection was a strategy to organize the ongoing discourse and to fill in the gaps in the L2. The use of the L2 was in some cases carried out without consideration of the interlocutor's position as an L2 learner.

All these studies show that in both L1 and L2 selection many factors related to learners' identity, L2 proficiency, and surrounding environment come into play and that a correct interpretation of code-switching by researchers is a complex task.

In computer mediated discourse like chat rooms, e-mails, forums and networks, code-switching becomes an even more complicated issue because it is characterized by both synchronous, which requires participants to be online simultaneously, and asynchronous modes, in which messages can be stored and read at any time (Danet & Herring, 2007). Moreover, CMC, especially in its synchronous modality, employs a less rich vocabulary and a simpler syntax with a limited number of subordinates, and it is characterized by a wide range of abbreviated words, speed and inaccuracy. Given the hybridity of this form of communication and similarity to spoken language, it poses many challenges both to language learners and researchers studying code-switching with a CA approach, as it becomes much harder to detect mistakes. Some researchers hold that in the majority of cases these nonstandard forms, which include grammatical, spelling, punctuation and capitalization errors, are not due to a lack of knowledge but to the informal characteristics of the internet talk and to the immediacy of the medium (Cárdenas-Claros & Isharyanti, 2009; Danet & Herring, 2007). On the one hand, the informal context of online chats is less face-threatening for learners; on the other hand, the use of informal forms might be misleading for learners in their L2 interactions and give rise to misunderstandings. Misunderstandings occur in particular if the learner is a novice to the TL and if his/her partner adopts colloquial forms in the TL (Crystal, 2006). These misunderstanding trigger repair sequences that interrupt the flow of the conversation and the intersubjectivity between the participants (Tudini, 2010). These repair sequences, in turn, might damage learners' identities as proficient learners and diminish the opportunities to learn because learners feel less confident with the TL.

Some studies have extensively examined the social meaning of language selection between L2 learners and NSs in SCMC situations. Kurata (2004, 2007, 2011, 2014) conducted inspiring studies in informal university settings combining the results of offline and online conversations of learners' informal networks of friends. She adopted Auer's (1984, 1988) model of bilingual interaction to conduct an in-depth examination of L1/L2 selection at a micro-level, while analyzing spontaneous, informal conversations among learners of Japanese in Australia with both NSs and NNSs of the TL both in offline and in online chat interactions. She noticed that code-switching may assist participants to achieve understanding, and that it triggers metalinguistic discourse, interactional and pragmatic competence and TL vocabulary.

This investigation is concerned with the role played by language learners in their L1/L2 selection and their strategic use of code-switching as a tool and resource to open up opportunities to speak and progress in their L2 learning, particularly within the spontaneous conversations occurring in informal and semi-informal contexts of online communities. Kurata (2011) demonstrated that opportunities to use L2 can be constructed by learners' active code alternation. These opportunities are mediated by learners' and interactants' collaborative effort and by the dynamic on-going conversation. Similarly to Kurata, this study is applying Auer's model of bilingual interaction in order to explain learners' development of interactional competencies in conversational contexts, language negotiation, and agreement on a common language of interaction; to understand if and why there is a speaker's preference for a given language (responsive utterances in the other language) and the reasons behind this selection. This study, drawing on Kurata, is expected to show that learners' language selection of the L1 or L2 is conditioned by some factors such as the norms and social roles occurring within the community where they are interacting, the learners' perception of their proficiency in the L2 and the role played by the learner's interlocutor (they could be NSs or more proficient L2 learners). The micro-analysis of interactions of the case studies in chapter 4, will tackle all these aspects relating to code-switching.

The last sections of this chapter revolve around the explanation of the methodological measures adopted to carry out this study.

2.4. Research Design

The empirical work of this dissertation is guided by the conceptual framework of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and by AT framework, which derives from Vygotsky. AT has been selected as a theory applicable to this study in order to gain a better understanding of the complex L2 learning practices enacted in the online environments of online communities. It is also considered as a valuable conceptual tool for understanding learners' construction of opportunities in these communities both on a micro and a macro level, taking into account each learner as an individual interdependent upon and in relationship with the social environment of the community.

The next sections will shed light on the methodological decisions orienting this dissertation and on their connections to the theoretical framework.

2.4.1. Methodological decisions driving the investigation and the 6 phases

As previously outlined, the objective of this study is to learn about learners' behaviours and opportunities to use the TL within online communities for language learning in order to gain a better understanding of the activities occurring in these communities and of how social networking and participation unfold. In order to achieve this objective, the methodology of this thesis relies on the interpretative paradigm, which holistically reconstructs isolated pieces of facts into a meaningful whole (Schwandt, 1994), and which sees the world as complex, dynamic and socially constructed, interpreted and experienced by people in their interactions with each other and the social systems (Schwandt, 1994). According to this paradigm, social beings create meaning and constantly make sense of their worlds; knowledge is constructed and is based not only on observable phenomena, but also on subjective beliefs, values, reasons, and understandings; theories are constructed from multiple realities and shaped by social and cultural context (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The present analysis of the online communities takes into account all phenomena as a complex system and the research focuses on the complex interdependencies and dynamics developing within this system.

In accordance with its interpretative sociocultural framework, this study adopts a mainly qualitative approach, which makes use of different observation strategies and is defined by the following features, as described by Denzin and Lincoln (1994:2).

Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials case study, personal experience, introspective, life story interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts-that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives.

As Dooly & O'Dowd (2012) point out, the methodology used in sociocultural-oriented research in telecollaboration is essentially qualitative and interpretative, and the present study, as previously explained, will not be an exception. In this study various and mixed methods are combined using quantitative and qualitative data. Nevertheless, as I previously remarked, it is primarily a qualitative study as it only relies on the statistical data in the initial phase and it possesses the defining features of qualitative research according to Perry (2005), being a study conducted in a real-life setting, involving the investigator's attentive observation, adopting a holistic approach and involving extensive data collection that is mainly subjected to textual analysis.

In order to ensure internal validity, I decided to use data triangulation, drawing on a wide range of techniques (from participant observation and ethnographic methods to online survey, interviews, stimulated recall interviews, case studies and micro-analysis of the learners' interactive discourse under a CA perspective). In addition, the ethnographic approach will be employed throughout the whole process and within the context of each case study. The ethnographic lens will allow a deeper understanding of learners' online language learning experience as a whole, complex system.

The methodology adopted, narrowing gradually the scope, is funnel-shaped and it consists of 6 phases. As figure 2.4 shows, each phase opens up the way to the subsequent phase, developing a progressively deeper understanding and narrowing the focus on the behaviours enacted by informal learners in these communities, on the modalities in which peer assistance among them occurs, and on the different types of assistance they provide each other.

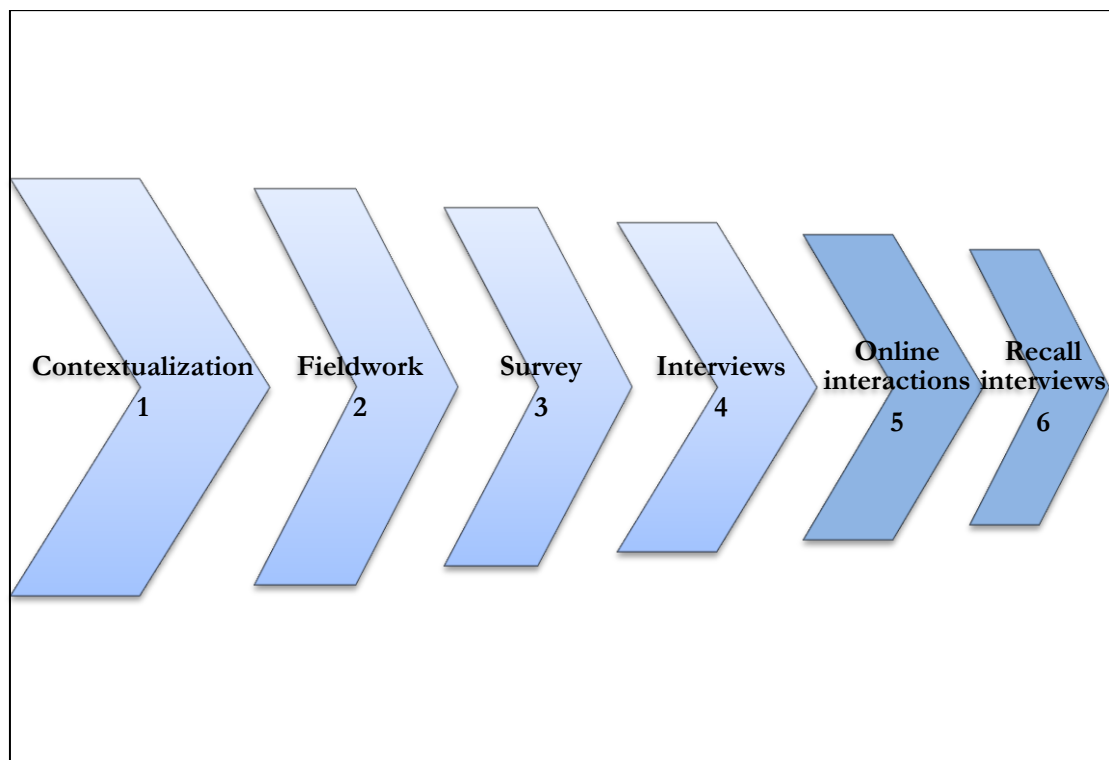


Fig. 2.4 The six methodological phases of the investigation

Phase I. Contextualization. Revision of the existing landscape of online communities for language learning, description of their main features and selection of the two communities for my investigation according to the criteria listed in appendix A.

Phase II. Fieldwork. Immersion and participation in the activities of the communities of study, inhabiting the communities since October 2010, when the researcher's personal accounts were created. Observation of learners' behaviours and notes taking.

Phase III. Survey. This phase corresponds to the online survey submission. The objective of this phase is to identify trends, patterns of behaviours and main practices among language learners in the online communities, based on the previous phase's initial observations, and to provide the first quantifiable data and a general description of the characteristics of the population under examination.

Phase IV. Interviews. The survey results open the way to the core of the investigation, which consists of learners' detailed accounts of their experiences elicited from a first cycle of interviews. A second cycle of interviews is carried out with the same learners at a later time in order to investigate the presence of changes over time in their level of commitment to the platforms.

Phase V. Online interactions. In turn, the interview phase opens up the way to the selection of case studies and to the analysis of their online interactions. This provides more con-

crete and practical evidence of how and according to what modalities learners' experiences occur and develop within the environment of online networks.

Phase VI. Recall interviews. This phase consists in interviewing the case studies at a time distance from the original interviews with a two-fold purpose: first, to verify whether their bonds with their language partners have been strengthened, whether they have created new bonds, and whether their level of engagement with the platform has maintained constant, decreased or increased; second, also recording learners' reflections on the online interactional data sent months prior, to find out whether their language exchange partnerships have produced long-term learning outcomes. This stage only affects a subset of the population, the case studies.

2.4.2. Online ethnography and multiple case study approach

As summarized in the previous section, a holistic longitudinal multiple online ethnographic case study approach is adopted, which is naturalistic and utilizes the spontaneous discourse of several cases of learners. This online ethnographic case study approach is consistent with the interpretative paradigm, which explains why for this investigation the hypotheses are not present. The limitation of such studies is that the presence of the researcher inevitably influences the community under investigation and that these studies are considered as subjective and biased.

The combination of the ethnographic method and the case study method will generate results that will be contrasted and compared in search of similarities and differences, in order to improve the validity of the triangulation. In this way, the methodological triangulation, that is, the use of different methods to corroborate each other, allowed the cross-checking of the data collected, improving further internal validity. In fact, in order to analyse and observe social interactions, the quantitative data of a typical survey instrument are not sufficient; careful in-depth interviews with open-ended questions combined with the analysis of learners' spontaneous online discourse, resulted to be more effective to delve into the culture of L2 online communities.

More in detail, moving under the interpretative paradigm and the framework of sociocultural theory, the study relies on online ethnography, which is considered as the most common approach to investigating online communities (Thomsen, Straubhaar & Bolyard, 1998). Through online ethnography I have studied the culture of the communities

selected, the norms and rules determining learners' behaviour, their shared values and beliefs, their practices and their understanding of the surrounding environment also when relating to others. In addition, a longitudinal study has been deemed the most suitable to achieve the objectives of this research. Through a longitudinal ethnography, I was able to observe, immerse myself in the culture of these communities and familiarize myself with its set of established norms and rules, in order to reveal the complex dynamics occurring in these environments. This research method was useful to understand how online learners interact with one another, to identify several clusters of learners' interactional behaviour, what values they have internalized, what teaching practices and strategies they have discovered, and to understand what motivates learners' commitment to the learning communities.

With regard to the online ethnographic approach, it is necessary to clarify the terminology in use for this thesis. The expression "online ethnography" is an umbrella concept used to contextualize this study as belonging to the category of computer-mediated fieldwork. In fact, the term "online ethnography" (or "digital ethnography") is a generic term for doing any sort of ethnographic work using some sort of online or digital method. However, "online ethnography" does not have a specific set of procedures, methodologies and ethical guidelines.

Instead, the word that best reflects this study is "netnography" (Kozinets, 2010), which will be the term in use from this moment forth in this thesis. As Kozinets underlines, it is important to distinguish between "research *into* online communities" and "research *on* online communities" (pp. 63-64). The studies belonging to the former category examine "general social phenomena whose social existence extends well beyond the Internet and online interactions" (p.64). To this regard, Kozinets reports the example of fan fiction communities, wide and large cultural phenomenon to which might correspond an online community. This approach studies the online community as an extension of a wider community in order to understand it better. In this case the online component supports the comprehension of the community's behaviour at large. In contrast, the latter approach directly relates to the study of online communities and online culture in itself. It is "research that is interested in the social processes that govern the behaviours" (p.63) of the new members entering the online community. In such studies, "online communities, online identities, online sociolinguistic patterns, cyberculture(s), relationships that

emerge through CMC” (p.64) are core elements of the investigation. This study follows this second approach; it is about learners’ behaviours “*on* online communities” for L2 learning given that the online aspect plays a fundamental role and given that it is about language learners in relation to the environments of online communities. As Kozinets (2010) underscores, in the case of “research into online communities”, netnography plays a supportive secondary role, while in the case of “research on online communities”, netnography plays a central role. This is the reason why this research has a primarily netnographic focus.

Moreover, netnography refers to a specific set of online ethnographic procedures characterized by a particular methodology, including an epistemological background, analytic frameworks, and a consistent and evolving set of guidelines for *entrée*, observation, data analysis, ethics, and so on (Kozinets, 2010). These guidelines are those adopted for this study. The *entrée* phase, for instance, is the process of initial entry to a new community. A successful *entrée* is often preceded by research of the community, which is what has been done for the selection of *Livemocha* and *Busuu* (For the ethical measures employed see 5.3.1).

Netnography proved to be a valuable tool to explain the core constructs at the bases of the social processes that govern the behaviour of online L2 learners and their roles within the community. In line with the focus of the research, I employed mainly “pure” netnography as a stand-alone method because it was consistent with the study on online community. Therefore, the method of gathering data through the online interactions was considered to be fully appropriate to the study and provided an exhaustive explanation of the phenomenon. However, the approach was combined with ethnography¹⁷ only in the case of three interviewees who were interviewed face-to-face. This was not due to methodological but to practical reasons, because of the geographical location of these interviewees. Moreover, this is a further demonstration of the fact that the boundaries between the physical world and the phenomena of online communities are not so sharp and that in all likelihood future ethnography in contemporary society is destined to have more and more blended connotations and to combine data deriving from face-to-face environment with data from SCMC.

¹⁷ Such approach is defined by Kozinets (2010) as “blended” ethnography/netnography (p.65).

As I previously anticipated, netnography has its unique set of practices and procedures established by the scholars in this field that set it apart from common face-to-face ethnography. To begin with, netnography is less obtrusive in comparison with common ethnography and gave me the option of invisible lurking, as well as the ability to retrieve past online conversations (Kozinets, 2010). In addition, my netnographic approach is mainly participant-observational and makes a wide use of hybrid and variegated techniques for collecting, analysing and representing the data related to the learners inhabiting the online communities under study. These techniques include participant observation, descriptive statistics by means of an online survey, online interviews, online interactional data collection and some online written materials such as learners' diaries.

The adoption of netnography implied dealing with specific issues at stake when conducting research *on* online communities, which are at the basis of the four key-differences outlined by Kozinets (2010:68-72) and that differentiate the online from the face-to-face fieldwork. These issues are:

- *Alteration* (and consequently *adaptation*) to various technological media and the ability to manage synchronous and asynchronous communication, time-lag and the “altered symbolic and temporal topography to the social interaction” (p. 69).
- *Anonymity* or *pseudonymity* of learners' participation (the use of avatars as profile pictures in SNSs), which in the specific case of this study might have implied a different online expression of learner's identity as a proficient language learner.
- Enhanced *accessibility* to online groups that not only share the same interests but also part of their private information, and consequently a new level of exhibitionism and voyeurism encountered by the netnographer.
- Automatic *archiving* of exchanges, which entails an easy retrieval of the online content since it can be easily found, recorded and reproduced.

For all these reasons, as a netnographer, I had to take careful and attentive measures in order to ensure that my participants were protected and not harmed in any way.

In addition, this thesis adopts a case-study approach because it takes into consideration the perspective of three learners of the online communities and their online interactions (see Chapter 4). Case-study is defined as “an in-depth, multi-faceted investigation, using

qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon. The study is conducted in great detail and often relies on the use of several data sources” (Feagin, Orum & Sjoberg, 1991:2). This approach allowed an in-depth understanding of the participants’ learning experiences and perspectives, as well as more focus on the process of construction of L2 use and learning opportunities in the online interactions. Furthermore, dealing with multiple case studies, means that this thesis aims to identify general trends and patterns and, at the same time, develop a more detailed explanation of each individual case/learner.

The techniques (fieldwork, online survey, online interviews) related to the netnographic process will be presented in the next chapter (chapter 3); instead the techniques adopted with the case studies (online interactional data, recall interviews) will be presented in chapter 4.

2.5. Conclusion

This chapter has presented the aims and the research questions, the theoretical bases and the epistemological and methodological considerations of the study. Then, it has introduced the 6 phases of the methodology and their interconnection. The next chapter (Chapter 3) will present the first four phases of the methodology and will describe the techniques adopted (selection of the online communities, participant observation, online survey and online interviews) in detail. For each one of these empirical phases, the respective findings will be presented and the transition to the following phase will be explained according to the results that each phase revealed.

[CHAPTER 3]

Results (phases I-IV)

“You can never understand one language until you understand at least two.”

–Geoffrey Willans

This chapter approaches the chore of the study and tackles the first four phases of the methodology, which consisted of:

(I) (*contextualization*) Selection of *Livemocha* and *Busuu* as the settings for the investigation, explanation of the criteria that led to the identification of *Livemocha* and *Busuu* online communities as scenarios of this study and description of each one of these communities;

(II) (*fieldwork*) Preliminary netnographic data derived from participant observation within the communities. In this phase, the first observations about the online learning practices enacted by learners are provided;

(III) (*survey*) Submission and administration of an online survey. This phase is quantitatively descriptive since it attempts a preliminary description of learners' inhabitancy and experience in these online communities for L2 learning. The results of this phase contribute to delineate the main themes, which will be confirmed and further deepened in the following phase;

(IV) (*interviews*). The interview phase is characterized by semi-structured interviews addressed to the online learners of these communities. It is mainly a qualitative phase and it has answered most of the research questions of this study.

The next chapter (Chapter IV) deals with the last two phases of the methodology, phase V (*online interactions*) and VI (*recall interviews*).

3.1. Contextualization and fieldwork

This section opens phases 1 and 2 of the methodology, contextualization and fieldwork. First, it was necessary to be aware of the existing landscape of social networking systems

for L2 educational activities and to have a clearer picture of the presence of informal channels where learners gather and communicate in their TL. For this purpose, after having browsed the literature on the topic and after having explored the existing L2 learning scenario, a list of possible sites eligible for the current investigation was created. This selection was carried out taking into account the criteria proposed by Boyd & Ellison (2007) and Zourou (2012) together with personal criteria, as explained in chapter 3, section 3.1.2. The researcher activated her own account in many online communities and, through the guidance of these criteria, she selected two communities as scenarios for the investigation (phase I). Then, participant observation started in the two communities selected (phase II).

3.1.1. *The current scenario of online communities for L2 learning*

The scenario of online communities for language learning is a complex one and it is difficult to map out given the novelty of this phenomenon, given the changes these communities are constantly subjected to, given the presence of different forms of groups to learn languages and the fact that new initiatives spring up day after day. The experts in the field (Cotroneo, 2011; Loiseau et al. 2011; Potolia et al., 2011; Zourou, 2012) have made several but not definitive attempts to categorize this wide landscape over these latest years. Drawing on the existing literature and on further observations, this study proposes a more recent categorization and offers some examples of online communities that match with each category, with the awareness that it is not feasible to grasp every single online space of the endless universe of the online communities. Following these considerations, this study distinguishes among:

(a) Websites providing learning tools such as online dictionaries and translators, forums and communities with learning tips and explanations, such as *WordReference* (<http://www.wordreference.com/>) and *Forvo* (<http://forvo.com>). These websites often host L2 learning oriented communities and forums. These forms of communities have been taken into account because they show educational activities inside, and sometimes, mutual aid, cooperation and sense of belonging. This broad category also includes video-sharing websites such as *YouTube* (<https://www.youtube.com/>) and *DailyMotion* (<http://www.dailymotion.com/>) offering interactive courses and online classes; language learning *Meetup* groups (<http://www.meetup.com/>); blogs containing a rich collection of links and references to several online resources such as *Languesenligne*

(<http://languesenligne.blogspot.com/>) and ESL Monkey (<http://eslmonkey.blogspot.com.es/>); websites containing online materials for language teaching and learning with grammar explanation and exercises such as *Italien-Facile.com* (<http://Italien-Facile.com/>), *Impariamo l'italiano* (<http://www.impariamoitaliano.com/>) and *Memrise* (<http://www.memrise.com/>).

This category also embraces institutional webpages offering free learning materials, such as the *BBC* pages for English learning, both the old one that has been archived but can still be used (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/>) and the new *BBC* language page (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/>); language podcasting sites such as *Grammar girl* (<http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl>) and *World Languages Podcasting* (<http://www.worldlanguagespodcasting.com/>), which is not free; learning communities set up by university centres but publicly available, such as *Study Zone*, created by the *Language Centre* at the *University of Victoria*, (<http://web2.uvcs.uvic.ca/elc/studyzone/>) or *LangMedia* (<http://langmedia.fivecolleges.edu/>), offering language materials by American colleges and universities.

(b) Marketplaces. Language websites that require users to pay for tutoring and at the same time provide free interaction in the several international groups and forums. Often there are courses and lessons created by the members themselves.

In this group are included communities such as:

Italki (<http://www.italki.com/>)

Palabea (<http://www.palabea.com/>)

LingQ (<http://www.lingq.com/>)

(c) Language exchange communities without didactic materials. These are free spaces designed to favour socialization among language learners without the presence of learning material. They usually have e-tandem potential and a simple and intuitive interface with little social web features. Examples of these platforms are:

xLingo (<http://www.xlingo.com/>)

Lang-8 (<http://lang-8.com>)

SharedTalk (<http://www.sharedtalk.com/>)

Interpals (<http://www.interpals.net/>)

PenPal World (<http://www.penpalworld.com/>)

The Penpals Network (<http://www.tpn.info/>)

The Global Language Exchange (<http://language.derekr.com/>)

(d) Language exchange communities with didactic materials. These are free language immersion sites to favour meetings among language learners and peer assistance. They also have a tandem potential. The didactic material is usually learner generated content and it is made of videos and articles. Users sometimes can submit textual contributions to be corrected by NSs. Examples of such category are:

Lingozone (<http://www.lingozone.com/>)

Polyglot Club (<http://polyglotclub.com>)

VoxSwap (<http://www.voxswap.com/>)

Yabla (<https://www.yabla.com>)

Tongueout! (<http://www.tongueout.net/>)

The Mixxer (<http://www.language-exchanges.org/>)

My Happy Planet (<http://www.myhappyplanet.com>)

English, Baby! (<http://www.englishbaby.com/>)

SayJack (<http://www.sayjack.com/>)

(e) Language groups within general and very popular social networks such as *Facebook, Twitter and MySpace*. These groups are usually set up in general social networks by teachers and investigators in order to test the efficacy of social networking for their L2 class over a semester (where the activity in the SNS is considered as part of the syllabus). They are considered as transversal communities, that is vertical networks oriented towards a specific interest (in this case L2 learning) but relying on a horizontal social network, that is, a general one (*Facebook* and *MySpace*). In these communities, guidelines, tasks and assignments are usually given to learners over the semester and the teacher acts as a tutor/guide, in the learning process. Moreover, despite the figure of the teacher, the relationships learner/teacher is often blurred, given the informal context of the social network. In this category fit several recent studies and initiatives (Antenos-Conforti, 2009; Blattner & Fiori, 2009, 2011; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012a, 2012b; Cotroneo, 2011; Halvorsen, 2009; McLaughlin & Lee, 2007; Mills, 2009; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011) aiming to understand the potential of SNSs for language learning activities.

(f) Web services to create personal social networks. Usually teachers make use of these services to create personalized networks and use it for their own classes (See McBride, 2009). The SNSs considered in this selection embrace:

Ning (<http://www.ning.com/>)

Elgg (<http://elgg.org>)

Twiducate (<http://www.twiducate.com/>)

SocialGo (<http://www.socialgo.com/>)

(g) Structured language learning communities. These communities combine didactic resources and structured learning pathways with an integrated system of textual and video chat thought for socialization purposes. These communities for L2 learning are often characterized by self-paced lessons, by a social environment and learners working in peers or simply sharing their interest in the TL through mutual advice, questions, and discussions. Although these communities present e-tandem forms of L2 learning, they do not use the term as such and there is not guidance on how to follow tandem's principles. To this category belong language communities such as:

Livemocha (<http://learn.livemocha.com/>)

Busuu (<http://www.busuu.com/>)

Babbel (<http://www.babbel.com/>)

(h) Online communities of teachers and learners related to institutional projects.

This category embraces European projects oriented towards L2 learning, such as those described more in detail in chapter 1 (section 1.1.3). Examples for this category are:

Lingo

(http://eblul.eurolang.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=68&Itemid=37)

Lingua D Project (<http://www.cisi.unito.it/tandem/learning/lingua-d-eng.html>)

eTwinning (<http://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm>)

ELVIN (European Languages Virtual Network)

(<http://flexilab.eu/root/web/livingweb.nsf/do?open&lang=en&site=default&page=pilot-elvin>)

eTandem (<http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/etandem/etindex-en.html>)

Speak Apps (<http://www.speakapps.eu>)

INTENT (Integrating Telecollaborative Networks into Foreign Language Higher Education)
(<http://www.intent-project.eu/intent-project.eu/index.htm>)

TIL4 project (telecollaboration, intercultural language acquisition) (<http://www.tilaproject.eu/>)

The following part explains according to what criteria *Livemocha* and *Busuu* have been selected as scenarios for this thesis.

3.1.2. The selection of the online communities for the investigation: Livemocha and Busuu

The selection process resulted in two websites selected as representative of communities for L2 learning, *Livemocha* and *Busuu*. The communities selected belong to category (g) structured language learning communities. These language learning online communities have specific SNSs features since they allow learners (1) to create their own profile, (2) to add friends to their network and to see the other users' networks, (3) to browse in search of new friends, in other words "networking" (boyd & Ellison, 2007) which, according to Zourou (2012), entails "relationship initiation". These communities also allow learners to (4) create a network of friends, (5) to communicate with their network contact through private messages and chat, (6) and to receive feedback to their submissions from the other learners. This last feature is typical of online communities designed for L2 learning (Zourou, 2012).

Taking into account these features, the selection of *Livemocha* and *Busuu* has been done according to some more pedagogical, technical and environmental usability criteria, after having browsed several webpages and after having lived in first person some of these online communities. These criteria are explained in detail in the appendix (See Appendix A) but the following grid offers a summary of them:

Table 3.1 Criteria adopted for the selection of the online communities of the study

| FORMAL DESCRIPTION | | |
|--|---|---|
| Community information (name, link, SNS in use) | | |
| Behind the community (creator, institution, location, references) | | |
| Description of the activity of the community (L2 objectives, subjects taught, context of L2 learning, duration of learning activity) | | |
| General observations (learner role, teacher role, contact with NSs, limitations of the community, personal evaluation) | | |
| INTERPRETATIVE DESCRIPTION | | |
| Learners and pedagogical usability issues | | |
| Learner Autonomy | Identity formation | |
| Content creation | Personal trustiness, confidence, self-perception | |
| Digital Literacy | Self-harvesting | |
| Self-organization | Self regulation (intercultural competence) | |
| Initiative-taking | Learning outcomes | |
| Social relations and social interaction issues | | |
| Collaboration | | |
| Coordination | | |
| Cooperation | | |
| Reflective communication mode | | |
| Motivation | | |
| Environment and technical usability issues | | |
| Platform System | Topography | Platform System L2 learning perspective |
| Main features | Number of users | L2 skills enhanced |
| RSS feeds | Average age of users | Languages in use |
| Discussion forum | Type of network (Horizontal, vertical, transversal) | Presence of reliable translation tools |
| Communities of interest | Aim (social network or social networking) | Videochat and possibility to record conversations |
| Blogs | Time (duration information online) | Keyboard facilities for other alphabets |
| Profile page | Memory | Pedagogical tasks |
| Embedded applications | Cognition (symbolic, textual) | Possibility for learners' joint creation of an artefact |
| Other features included | Role played by advertising | Hyper-textual learning content |

As the grid illustrates, the data of each L2 learning group and community analysed were divided into two main categories, descriptive and interpretative. The descriptive category reports basic information to identify the group and the institution of company behind it. Instead, the interpretative part is a fine-grained description of the peculiarities of each environment. It is divided into three sections. The first section, learners and pedagogical usability issues, regards two fundamental aspects of learning process and social network-

ing, learner autonomy and identity formation. The indicators for learner autonomy are content creation, digital-literacy, self-organization and initiative-taking, while the indicators of identity formation are personal trustiness, self-harvesting, intercultural competence and learning outcomes. All these indicators are fully explored and explained in the appendix section. The second section, social relations and social interaction issues, describes different forms of sociality and joint work present in a hypothetical community and offers indicators of learner motivation, which is what drives students' engagement to a community. Finally, the third section, environment and technical usability issues, outlines the technical and design features of a community under the label *platform system*; provides a description of the types of network and the way information is managed and stored under the label *topography*; and lists the ideal characteristics of a platform under the learner point of view, under the umbrella *platform system L2 learning perspective*.

All these criteria refer to a utopic community since a community presenting all these elements does not currently exist. The object was to research communities presenting characteristics as closer as possible to the ones displayed in the grid and better explained in Appendix A.

The communities that resulted from this selection were *Livemocha* and *Busuu*. Both are specifically thought and designed for language learning and both offer grammar instructions, reading comprehension exercises, interactive role-plays and live and asynchronous interaction with other NSs within the community. When learners submit coursework for peer review, NSs provide feedback on how that learner is progressing and users can aid others in learning the languages that they are proficient in while learning other languages themselves. In *Livemocha* and *Busuu* learners are also teachers and can gain rewards (respectively “Mochapoints” and “Berries”) according to their performance as teachers and as learners.

Both the websites require learners to register at no charge and in both the communities each user is not only a “learner” of his/her own TL but also a “teacher” of his/her own mother tongue. Learners can set up a profile, provide basic information about them, add their TLs and the languages in which they are proficient and in which they can provide assistance as if they had a sort of learning eportfolio.

The courses are divided into learning units and, for each unit, users benefit from several types of material, such as vocabulary and key phrases, dialogues, audio recordings and PDFs to download. Learners work through the units at their pace and can keep track of their progress by means of short interactive reviews. Besides the individual courses, users can improve their conversational skills by connecting with NSs from all over the world via an integrated video-chat system. Learners have the possibility to check their progress regularly by going back to previous exercises and lessons whenever they desire.

*Livemocha*¹⁸ has its headquarters in Seattle and it was founded in 2007. It provides instructional materials in 38 languages (11 languages in the paid version) and it has approximately 12 million registered members from almost 200 countries all over the world, even though this number includes members who have signed up for 1 day and never logged in a new time. *Busuu* is a start-up company that was funded in Madrid in 2008 and moved its headquarters in London in 2012; it is the main competitor of *Livemocha*. It contains learning material in 12 languages and it has over 50 millions of users from over 200 countries. In the case of *Busuu*, the website explicitly mentions that the courses are based on the CEFR, covering the levels A1, A2, B1 and B2. In the case of *Livemocha*, there's no mention of it, which is not surprising since *Livemocha* is an American start-up funded in Seattle, while *Busuu* is European and based in Europe.

Livemocha's home page displays learners' recent activity, their progress and the medals and points collected, which are at the basics of the platform's motivational and rewarding system, as fig. 3.1 displays. In this community these points are redeemable and allow users to "pay" for more advanced courses, which would not be otherwise available for free.

¹⁸ The site has changed its design and its platform features after its partnership and acquisition by *Rosetta Stone* (April 2013). At the times when this study was conducted (2011-2012) the acquisition had not occurred yet. Therefore, in this study when I describe the online communities, I will refer to *Livemocha* and *Busuu* as they were in the period when this study was carried out. For a discussion of the changes implemented in *Livemocha* since April 2013, see chapter 5, section 5.2.1.

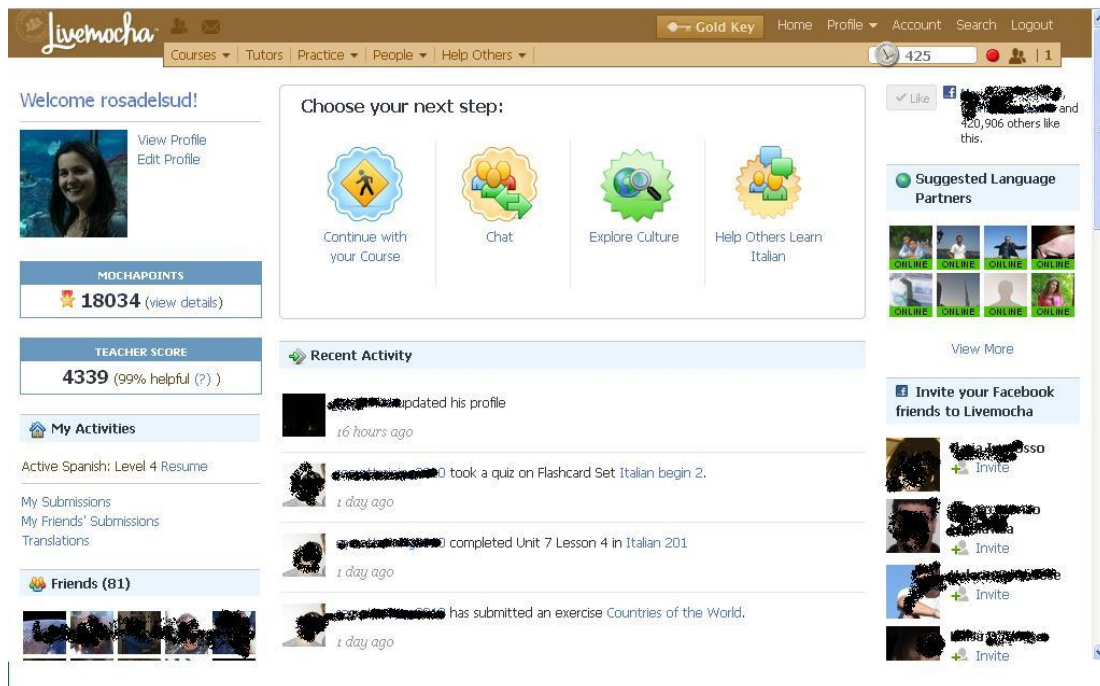


Fig. 3.1 *Livemocha's* main profile page

As the image shows there are four main sections of the platform: Start a course, Chat, Explore Culture and Help Others Learn¹⁹. In the Start a course section they have access to the list of courses they are enrolled to and can review the work they have submitted for review. In the Chat section learners are put into contact with the NSs of their TL through an integrated textual and video chat system. In the Explore Culture Section learners are invited to share photos and stories related to their countries of origin. In the Help Others Learn section learners are encouraged to become useful to the community and to assist their peers by reviewing their submission. In such a way, they earn medals and *Mochapoints*.

With reference to the didactic activities, each course consists of different units and each unit is designed in such a way that learners can practice the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. See the following image (fig. 3.2).

¹⁹ *Livemocha's* page has been regularly subjected to modifications and improvements in the organization of the lay-out over the years and it has already changed significantly since one of its latest descriptions (Brick, 2011). By the end of this dissertation it has evolved further.

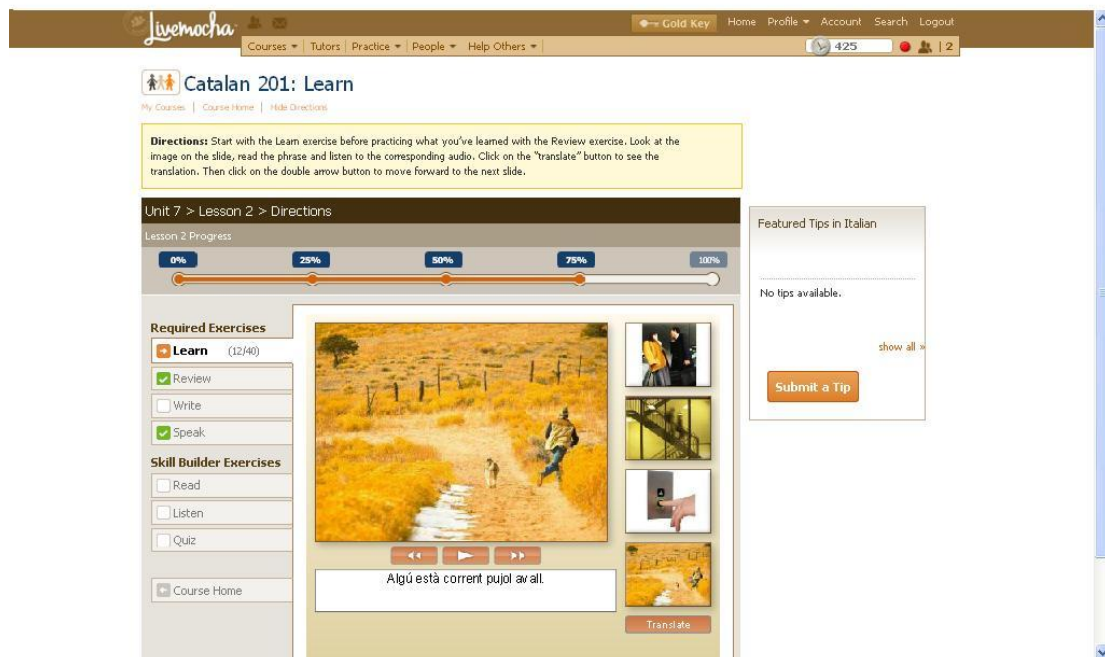


Fig. 3.2 Example of a lesson in *Livemocha*

As shown in fig. 3.2, each unit starts by a *learn* part in which basic words or sentences are automatically associated with images in order to favour the acquisition of the vocabulary of the TL. The end of this activity leads to the *review*, a section designed to train reading and listening skills, in which learners are submitted the same clusters of images to which they have to associate the same list of basic words and/or sentences presented in the previous section. They can be either presented in the written form or pronounced by an automated voice in order to train respectively the reading and the listening skills. Another type of exercise related to this part consists in listening to a sentence pronounced in the learner's native language and to arrange a list of words of the TL in order to have the equivalent translation of that sentence in the TL. In the *write* section learners are asked to read a prompt of few lines and then write a short composition by making use of the vocabulary learnt in that unit. Then they are invited to send their submission to their language friends on the platform or to other online anonymous users who are mainly NSs of the language in which the submission is written. Finally, in the *speak* section, participants are asked to recite a paragraph, to record it and then to submit it to their language friends on the platform or to other online anonymous users who are mainly NSs of the language in which the submission is pronounced. They can also be asked to recite a given dialogue with an automated voice.

Livemocha's rewarding system is made of tokens called “Mochapoints” awarded to those learners who submit revisions and provide feedback to the others’ revisions. In addition, those who receive feedback can rate their peer’s comments to the submission. See the image below (fig. 3.3)

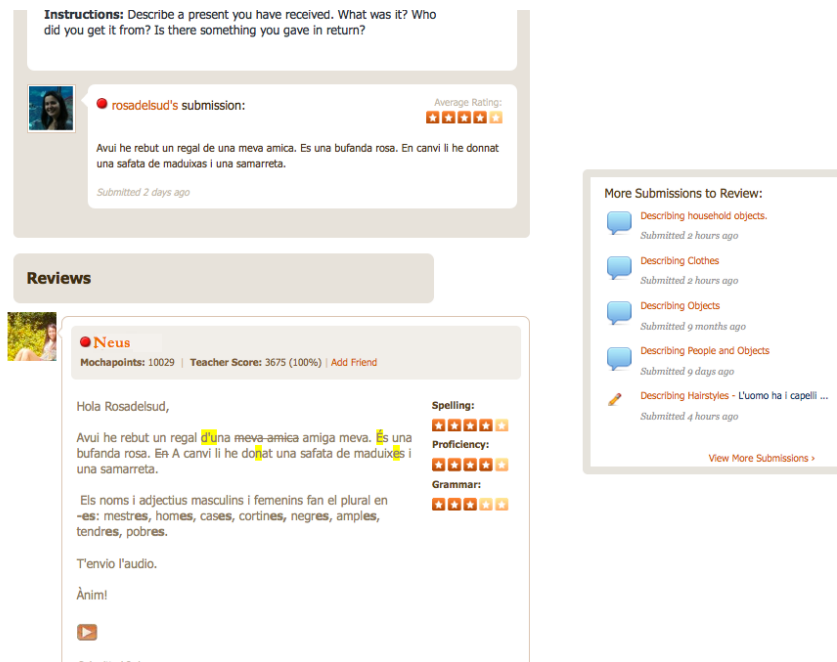


Fig. 3.3 Example of peer feedback in *Livemocha*

Livemocha has a wide variety of social networking features since on the learner profile’s page learners can update their status, post photos, describe themselves (age, relationship status, passions and hobbies); in addition the “wall” feature displays the newsfeed and allows learners to be update with the latest actions undertaken by their contacts.

Busuu's system presents similar features to *Livemocha* with the difference that it appears aesthetically more attractive but also more confused and that there is much more content not available unless you pay a fee. The learner’s main page displays the theme of a language garden, languages are hanging on traffic signals and follow each other according to the level of proficiency of each learner’s personal eportfolio. Users gain points displayed as “berries” but, unlike *Livemocha*, these berries are not redeemable and cannot be used to buy any course from the Premium version. In both *Livemocha* and *Busuu*, users are

charged if they want to unlock extra lessons and courses. In *Busuu* this occurs more frequently than in *Livemocha*. The platform is divided into four main sessions: Courses, Messages, Friends and Groups, as image 3.4 shows:

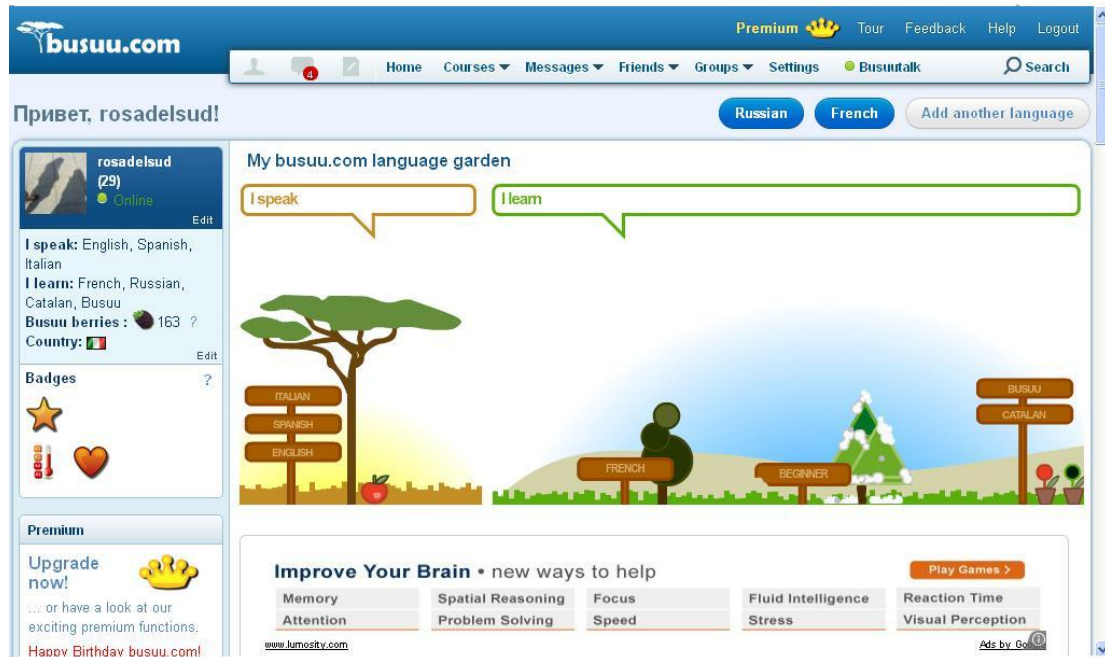


Fig. 3.4 *Busuu's* main profile page

In the first section learners have access to the list of courses they are enrolled in or can decide to enrol a new language course. In the Messages section they can reply ordinary messages from other users of the communities or they can review the other learners' written submissions. In the Friends section learners can use the chat tool and interact with NSs from all over the world. In the Group section learners can find groups of interest to discuss specific issues. This feature is not present in *Livemocha*.

The didactic material is made of lessons that consist of structured exercises that are automatically corrected. These exercises aim to favour the enhancement of both oral and written production skills. In the main page of the courses learners have the possibility to choose their language level according to the CEFR and the topic they need to focus on. These topics do not follow a pedagogical order and they mainly address the objective to develop grammar and vocabulary skills.

Following a pathway similar to *Livemocha*, *Busuu* lessons are organized in the following way:

Vocabulary. At this first stage the lesson consists of lists of words or expressions in the TL that can be translated into the L1; learners have to understand and memorize them. These words are pronounced by an automated voice and are associated with a list of images.

Dialogue. In this section it is possible to read and to listen to a dialogue using the same topics and words listed in the previous section. At the end of the dialogue, learners have to answer three questions related to the dialogue presenting more items. They have to tick the correct answer and the system corrects the exercises automatically without signalling the correct answer, which means that learners have to take the exercise a new time.

Writing. This stage allows learners to use the vocabulary previously explained to produce something on their own through a short composition. In this section learners usually have to reply an open question related to the topic previously faced and employing the vocabulary learned. To this regard, some of these words are available on the screen to facilitate their task. Once learners have carried out their task, they can either submit it to their contacts or the system itself, as in *Livemocha*, suggests a list of possible language learners who are expert of the TL of the learners who submitted the exercise. Once a correction by one of the members of the community has been done, learners receive a notification and can read the comments done to the submission. In addition they can evaluate their level of appreciation to that correction (through +1 or -1). (See image 3.5)

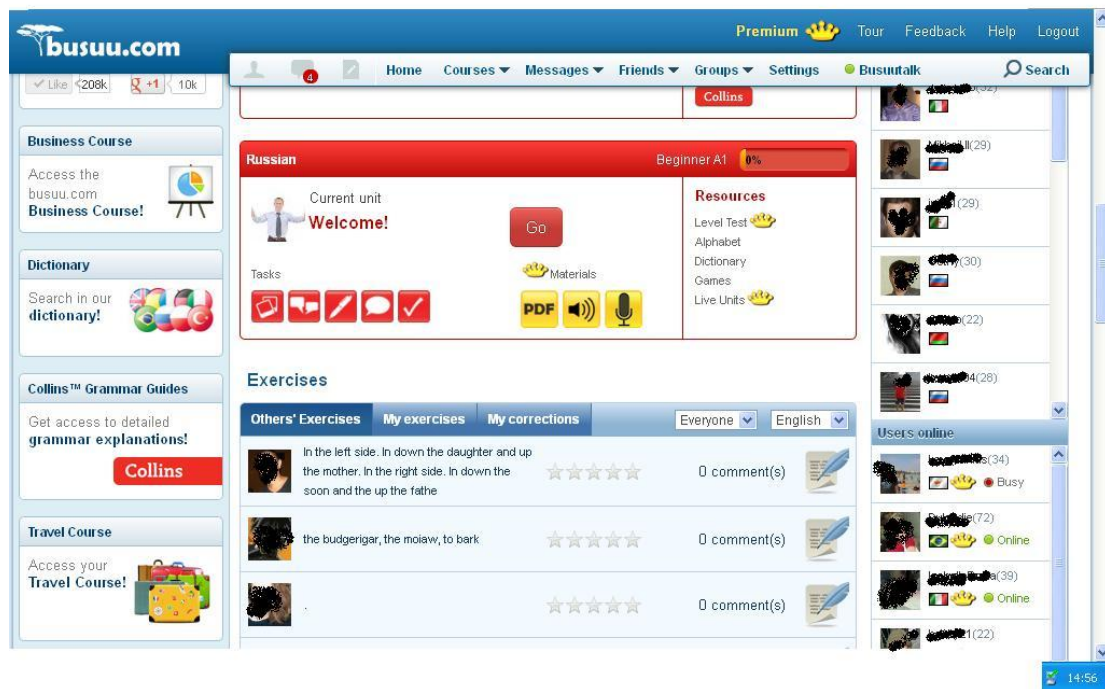


Fig. 3.5 Example of one lesson and comments in *Busuu*

Chat. In the next phase learners are invited to choose a language partner among a list of 30 online possible language partners, who are not necessarily NSs of the TL, but at least experts. In both *Livemocha* and *Busuu* the chat only can occur between two partners. Learners in this section are supposed to choose a topic of conversation in order to practice their speaking production skills.

Finally, *Busuu* incentivizes learners through a rewarding system named “Busuu barriers”, which are awarding badges posted on learners’ profiles after having completed the activities and after having provided feedback to their peers. Learners can give them to other learners or earn the possibility to open a group discussion in the forum.

3.1.3. First netnographic observations about the L2 learning communities

With the creation of personal accounts in both of these communities, phase 2 (*fieldwork*) formally started. The researcher started learning French and Russian in *Busuu* and Catalan and Russian in *Livemocha*, offering her assistance in Italian, English and Spanish. The researcher became an active user, exploring the L2 communities as social spaces by living in first person the user/learner’s experience and sharing emotions, problems and chal-

lenges with the other learners, through a multi-situated, interactive, dynamic ethnography.

The participant observation of the online communities was necessary both to establish rapport and to ensure a positive answer in the process of seeking people to interview (see section 3.3.2). The observation and the participation in the community life meant a full immersion in the environment and permitted to live in first person a social learning experience, and to learn how to speak the language of the community as a common member. I acted as a complete participant (Johnson & Christensen, 2008), which means that I became member of the communities and started participating to the community's activities without telling the members they were being observed and studied. I observed and recorded the characteristics of the communities, the interpersonal interactions among learners, significant behaviours, what does not happen and any power or hierarchy within the group.

During the fieldwork I engaged with the daily activities of the subjects of the communities at as many levels and possible, observing both casual and formal interactions, making photographic records of some features of the platforms or of specific conversational episodes. Following the considerations of Apgar (1983), Emerson (1983) and Harrison and Thomas (2009), as a researcher, I have been an observer who gains deep insights of the community and of social interactions among people; I needed to be skilled with the discourse of communication, to become a member of the communities selected and, while observing social interactions, I started identifying key concepts, and organizing and decoding the data coming out of the communities' shared knowledge. This provided me with the opportunity to reflect on learners' experiences critically and interpretatively, so that I was able to translate these experiences into research instruments.

Therefore, by the means of a research diary, qualitative observation and field notes, I lived the experience twice because I translated it into academic terms assuming the detached position of a researcher who interprets the experience lived critically. This was extremely important to prepare the following steps, the design of the online survey and the interview phase, especially the latter. In the interview phase, when learners were reporting their accounts, I was able to communicate with them and to understand the way

they interacted and made sense of the world around them (Borg, 2006) because I had inhabited the communities as a learner.

The first observations as a lurker and then the next as an active user allowed me to collect some general descriptions of the real practices occurring in these communities, which provided me with the context for the subsequent phase of brainstorming. In this phase I started writing the first accounts to describe what I had observed about learners' practices in these communities. Then, I identified the main thematic nucleus and drew the first conceptual maps in order to have a clearer idea on how to structure the questionnaire to elicit learners' perceptions and beliefs (see chapter 3, section 3.2.1)

Since the beginning it became clear that the objective of *Livemocha* and *Busuu* is to put learners in contact with NSs from all over the world and to share their learning progress with the community. However, this objective was not so easy to accomplish because the didactic material seemed to work against the accomplishment of this objective. In relation to the didactic material, the website is not equipped to satisfy the needs of more sociable learners and of more proficient learners who are able to have a conversation with NSs in the TL. In addition, a disparity exists between the skills and the level of difficulty and challenge each exercise aims to promote and the very basic activities students are actually required to complete.

Moreover, while exploring the platforms, I realised that the chat program allowed ongoing real life conversations with NSs of the TL and seemed to favour intercultural understanding. However, it was clear that these intercultural contacts only lasted a short time and had a *zapping* feature, as Chotel (2012) put it. This means that the online interactions among users are mainly discontinuous and fragmentary (see also 1.2.3). Therefore, the next phase of this investigation had to investigate whether the possibility to establish contact with NSs could open up additional channels for intercultural communication in the TL in order for learners to create more opportunities to practice the TL by creating their own personal network for tandem partnership.

In this netnographic phase, I mainly focused on the exercises' submission and on the feedback received by NSs in the exercise revision process. The digital written text plays a remarkable role because it best portrays the online rules established within the communi-

ties. Independently of befriending my contacts, I also had free access to the audio recordings submitted by the online learners as exercise submissions and exercise revisions of recited texts (this feature only was present in *Livemocha*). This material also contributed to generate insights on their forms of assistance. For instance, I discovered that there are learners who offered more complete feedback because their contribution combined both the audio and the textual features of the communities. The textual was a support to the audio feedback: while in the audio feedback NSs recited the text slowly stressing the mistakes made by the learners, the textual chat reported those mistakes in a written form and was usually complemented by an explanation of the grammar rule. These episodes were not uncommon, but I also found very concise commentaries by NSs to learners' submissions, which did not help them constructively. In addition, the same types of repair tended to overlap to the previous ones. This was interpreted as a signal that learners did not look at the other learners' commentaries, which posed some doubts on the idea of community.

3.2. From the fieldwork to the online survey

One of the most important features that emerged from the participant observation as a user/learner was that appropriate peer feedback seems to play a crucial role. This led to the assumption that this element shaped the sense of belonging to the community. On the one hand, when learners received feedback from their peers and had the possibility to “notice” their errors, this seemed to trigger their commitment to their learning process; on the other hand, the quality and accuracy of the feedback provided by peers remained questionable. Therefore, it was necessary to clarify these doubts by means of other methodological devices, which will be explained in the next section and will open phase III (*survey*).

3.2.1. Method: the online anonymous survey

In phase III, I developed and administered an initial survey instrument, in the form of a questionnaire in order to measure learners' general orientations, beliefs or knowledge about some aspects of their learning experience in the communities and to assess the ICT competencies of these learners and the use they were making of online communities and social media at large.

The reason why I selected this method is that it allows to collect quickly a wide amount of data without significant effort, excluded the previous demanding phase revolving around the design of the questionnaire. Aware of the fact that a questionnaire is a limited self-report instrument in its ability to provide an accurate description of the practices occurring in L2 online communities as well as to capture the complex nature of learners' opinions and perceptions, this survey was thought to provide a general description of the target population and to identify the main themes emerging from learners' experiences. These themes have been explored in the later phase of the interview (section 3.3) more in depth. By means of the survey I also expected to achieve a better understanding of the sustainability and effectiveness of the online community for long-term learning outcomes, that is, if learners' engagement maintained constant, decreased or increased over time.

Another important function of the survey was to select some members of the online communities to interview (see section 3.3.2) in order to collect more data about their online language experience. In fact, at the end of the questionnaire, learners were redirected to the researcher's page and invited to offer more help and to be available for in-depth interviews. In case of a positive answer, they were asked to write to me or to provide me with their personal contact (mail, or *Livemocha* profile name according to their preference).

The questionnaire was composed of different sections. The first (Section 1) obtained some information about learner's language background and experiences in foreign countries. The second (Section 2) sought to audit learners' concrete experience in the community, the main features explored about the online platform and the main reasons why they were learning there. The third section (Section 3) looked more closely at learners' personal evaluation of the community's affordances and constraints. This section included three optional open-ended questions, two of which were collocated at the very end of the questionnaire and in which learners were invited to express their views about positive and negative aspects about their learning experience in the community. Finally, the last section (Section 4) solicited demographic information about the respondents in relation to age, gender, country of origin, level of education and employment with the aim to discover more about the population inhabiting these online communities.

The 22 questions in the questionnaire have been chosen and designed with a clear understanding of the target audience in mind, that is, a wide and varied population difficult to capture. Therefore, careful attention was paid to wording, organization and lay-out in order to make it as much brief, clear and easy to read as possible. The questionnaire items were designed in such a way to be precise, short, to avoid loaded and double-barrelled questions, and to avoid double negatives. The response categories were exhaustive and not overlapping. The items chosen consisted of five-point agreement and importance summated rating scales (or Likert-type), five-point ascending ranking with closed-ended questions, several checklists and contingency questions. The survey was written in English and then translated into Spanish, Italian and Catalan. To ensure the questionnaire was comprehensible for online learners, it was then proofread and piloted on five people, four of whom were experts of the Faculty, and it was then revised several times. The English version of the survey is available in Appendix B.

If you set qualitative questionnaires and quantitative questionnaires as end points and mixed questionnaires in the middle of a continuum (Johnson & Christensen, 2008), this questionnaire falls between the middle and the quantitative end because it employed 19 closed-ended items and 3 open-ended items, which are typically more used in exploratory and qualitative research and which were left optional. These 3 open-ended questions and space for comments were useful to start exploring some questions and issues related to how online learners perceived these online communities as learning environments. Being this study mainly exploratory, these three questions were a remarkable source of insight for the qualitative phase of this study and, as I will show later on, not only did the results raise important issues that helped in the design of the interview script, but they also matched and confirmed the results of the interview analysis.

3.2.2. Subjects and data collection

After the selection of the online communities for the investigation, in June 2011 a long process of negotiation with the community managers of *Busuu* and *Livemocha* online communities started, with the aim to gain their collaboration for the submission of the anonymous online questionnaire to the online learners.

In order to achieve this objective, I wrote to the community managers of both the companies and I presented a research document describing the study and a letter where I

asked them for permission to send the anonymous questionnaire to the online communities' members. I also asked for their support and assistance in the process of submission of the questionnaire pointing out that one of its objectives was to seek learners to interview among its online respondents.

The negotiations with *Busuu* failed because the company expressed their interest for a quantitative research rather than qualitative and because they did not want to be involved in the process of selection of people to interview in order to respect their privacy. On the contrary, the negotiations with *Livemocha* produced a positive outcome and the company itself administered the web-questionnaire to a sample of *Livemocha*'s community members through their email addresses. The invitational email was brief, it underlined that the study was conducted by the Open University of Catalonia in Spain, and asked members to reply a few online questions providing a quick, anonymous, online feedback about their online learning experience on the platform, about its language learning benefits or drawbacks and about how it could be improved in the future. At the end, the email included a direct link to the web survey, which relied on a popular e-survey package and hosting service, *SurveyMonkey* (<https://www.surveymonkey.com>).

For the survey a non-random sampling technique called “purposive sampling” (also called “purposeful sampling” and “criterion-based selection”) was adopted. This technique is used in both quantitative and qualitative research (it has been adopted in the qualitative phase of this study as well,) and it is used when the researcher specifies the characteristics of the population of interest and locates individuals who meet these criteria (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

Therefore, the sample of this survey consisted of 3000 people chosen among those presenting specific characteristics, which are described as follows:

- 1000 people over 18 years old selected among those who were Spanish language speakers (mainly Spanish language NSs). They had been active, that is, they had logged in to their account, within the previous 30 days before the 12th October 2011, the day of the survey submission.
- 1000 people over 18 years old selected among those who were English language speakers (as section 3.2.3 will illustrate, this sample does not include mainly English language NSs). They had been active, that is, they had logged in to their ac-

count, within the previous 30 days before the 12th October 2011, the day of the survey submission.

- 1000 people over 18 years old selected among those who were Italian language speakers (mainly Italian language NSs). They had been active, that is, they had logged in to their account, within the previous 30 days before the 12th October 2011, the day of the survey submission.

The survey was submitted in October 12th 2011 at approximately 2:00 am Spanish time (17:00 pm - Seattle time) and data were collected in one-month span from October 12th to November 12th at night. The submission was in three languages, English, Spanish and Italian.

Out of the 3000 people of the sample 124 people (n=124) in total started the online survey and 102 (n=102) completed it. Therefore the response rate was 3.4% ($102/3000 \times 100$). The survey yields a very low response rate, which is one of the inherent problems of web-based survey, especially if participants are invited to participate by means of a link in their email box. As the following sections of this chapter will illustrate, its results confirm the findings of previous studies in the literature and match with the second phase of qualitative analysis of this study (involving a different sample of people), which leads to the assumption that, despite its low response rate, the survey was still able to represent the population from which the sample was originally drawn.

3.2.3. *Analysis*

The data were collected and automatically stored in an Excel spreadsheet that was later formatted in such a way to aggregate and combine the results of the surveys in the three different languages. This also permitted to create the charts and the tables of the following sections.

For the analysis of the demographic data and data related to learners' activity and to the temporal factor, percentages and response counts were used, whereas for the description of learners' opinions and evaluation in Likert-type close-ended items percentages and mean were adopted. These results, being categorical data, are mainly represented by pie and bar charts. As for the three open-ended items, online members' views and opinions were categorized into emerging domain themes and analysed accordingly. The qualitative

data emerged from the survey support and give meaning to the quantitative data analysis and are further strengthened by the qualitative data obtained in the interview phase.

As anticipated in 3.2.1, the 22 items of the questionnaire have been grouped in such a way so as to address 4 different aspects relevant for this study to which correspond respectively 4 different sections: (1) learners' language experience, (2) learners' concrete experience of the community, (3) learners' evaluation of the community, (4) learners' demographic data. The findings are presented in 4 sections. At the end of these sections, I provide an analysis of the feedback submitted by learners in relation to the three open-ended questions of the survey.

Section 4. Learners' Demographic Data (Qs. 16-20)

The questions of the fourth and last section of the online survey (see appendix B) were posed at the end because they tackled more private and sensitive issues such as gender, age, level of education and social status. The aim of these final questions was to obtain an overview of the profile/s of learners inhabiting this community. For the purpose of the analysis, section 4 will be presented as first in order to draw a background picture of the context and of the characteristics of the participants.

To begin with, according to the results of this survey, there is an overall balanced gender presence in *Livemocha*, leaning slightly towards female gender (60%). As for the country of origin, the learners surveyed are mainly from Italy (47%) since the survey was submitted in Italian to Italian NSs and from Latin America, being Colombia (9%) and Mexico (8%) the most representative countries among Spanish language speakers. With reference to the survey submitted to English speakers, the population is spread among English native speaking countries such as USA, UK, Australia and India, and big countries whose languages are considered challenging under a Western perspective, such as China and Russia. But the first relevant observation deals with the average age of *Livemocha's* users, as the graphic of Q.17 shows:

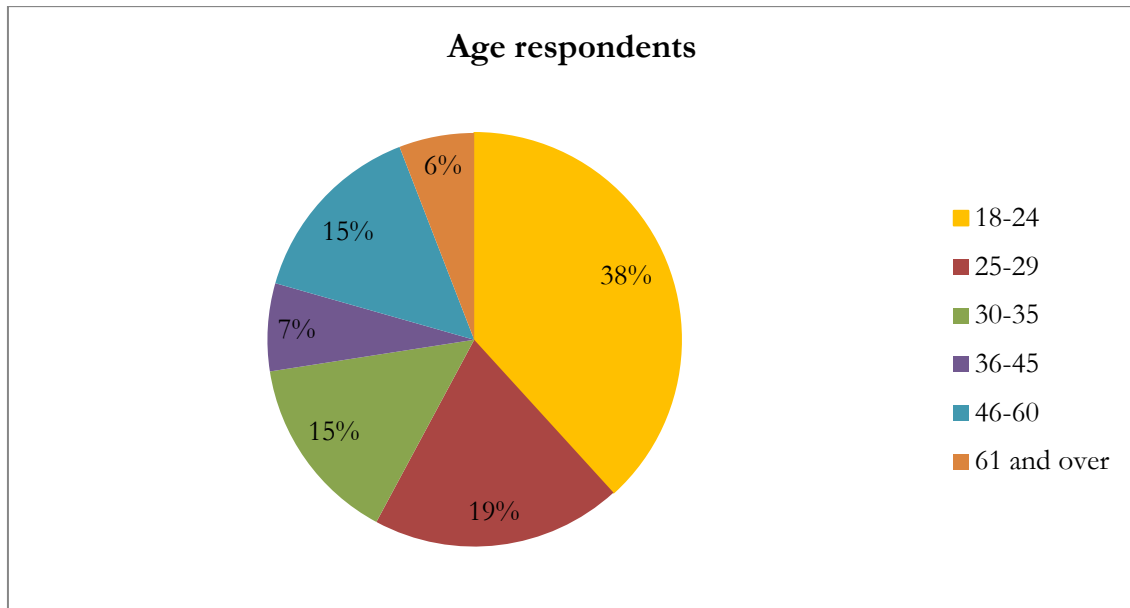


Fig. 3.6 Age of the survey respondents

As the graphic outlines, the population surveyed is young and mainly falls in the age group 18-24 (38%) followed by the age group 25-29 (19%), which leads to the hypothesis that these learners are mainly students. In fact, the other demographics questions (Qs. 16-20) confirmed this hypothesis, as table 3.4 illustrates:

Table 3.1 Sample demographics: background information on survey respondents

| | | Learners | |
|--------------------------|-------------|------------|-------|
| | | Percentage | Total |
| Gender | Male | 44.1% | 45 |
| | Female | 55.9% | 57 |
| Country of origin | Argentina | 2.8% | 3 |
| | Australia | 0.9% | 1 |
| | Brazil | 0.9% | 1 |
| | Bulgaria | 0.9% | 1 |
| | Chile | 1.8% | 2 |
| | China | 3.7% | 4 |
| | Colombia | 9.2% | 10 |
| | Costa Rica | 0.9% | 1 |
| | El Salvador | 0.9% | 1 |
| | Guatemala | 0.9% | 1 |
| | India | 0.9% | 1 |
| | Italy | 46.8% | 51 |
| | Mexico | 8.3% | 9 |
| | Nicaragua | 0.9% | 1 |
| | Peru | 0.9% | 1 |
| | Puerto Rico | 1.8% | 2 |
| Russian Federation | 0.9% | 1 | |

| | | | |
|---------------------------|--|-------|---------|
| | UK | 1.8% | 2 |
| | USA | 3.7% | 4 |
| | Venezuela | 4.6% | 5 |
| | Totals | | n = 102 |
| Level of education | | | |
| | Primary Education | 2.9% | 3 |
| | Secondary Education | 33.3% | 34 |
| | Tertiary Education | 47.1% | 48 |
| | Postgraduate Studies | 12.7% | 13 |
| | PhD | 2.9% | 3 |
| | Other | 1.0% | 1 |
| | Totals | | n = 102 |
| Social status | | | |
| | Working for payment or profit (full-time) | 27.5% | 28 |
| | Working for payment or profit (part-time) | 15.7% | 16 |
| | Looking for first regular job | 9.8% | 10 |
| | Unemployed | 5.9% | 6 |
| | Full-time student or pupil | 31.4% | 32 |
| | Looking after home/family | 2.0% | 2 |
| | Retired from employment | 5.9% | 6 |
| | Unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability | 1.0% | 1 |
| | Other (please specify) | 1.0% | 1 |
| | Totals | | n = 102 |

The results in the table suggest that the learners who responded to the questionnaire have a quite high level of education, since 33% of them reported to have completed the secondary school and are probably enrolled at the university. In addition, 32% of them declared to be a full-time student. Another 47% of them reported to have completed their degree (Tertiary education), and one of the most representative categories are full-time workers (27%). Overall, the picture that emerges is a young, socially active population, mainly made of students learning in formal environments or of young lifelong learners adults working full-time and probably combining their job or a formal course in the TL with non-formal and informal activities on the platform.

Section 1. Learners' Language Background (Qs 1-4)

The first item of the survey (Q.1) asked about learners' main (native) language. The questionnaire was sent in three languages, English, Spanish and Italian and those who replied the questionnaire in Spanish and in Italian are respectively Spanish (100%) and Italian (95%) NSs mainly. Nevertheless, in the case of the English questionnaire, the percentage of English NSs is reduced to 43%, and challenged by a higher percentage of learners whose main native language is Chinese (46%), which could be due to the fact that there is a certain amount of Chinese in *Livemocha* who prefer to be contacted in English and set this language as their main option. This can be due to several reasons: the first is that Chinese language is considered linguistically very distant from Western languages and very difficult to learn, especially in *Livemocha*. Therefore, by setting Chinese as their main language, they might have considered they would not attract potential language partners because of the difficulty of Chinese language. The second reason, which is not in contrast with the previous, is that they preferred to set English as vehicular language in order to be able to communicate with a wider number of people in the community. A third possible explanation is that they selected English language because this was also their TL in the platform.

This assumption is confirmed by concrete results. Q.4 asked about learners' TL and half (50%) of those who replied the questionnaire in English at the same time marked English as their TL. Moreover, in each questionnaire it is found that English is the most learned language, since it was selected as TL by 50% of respondents in the English survey, by 55.3% in the Spanish survey and by 48.3% in the Italian survey. This is an important result underlining the crucial role that English language plays as a vehicular language in these communities as an important means to communicate with people from all over the world. The following chart will illustrate this aspect further.

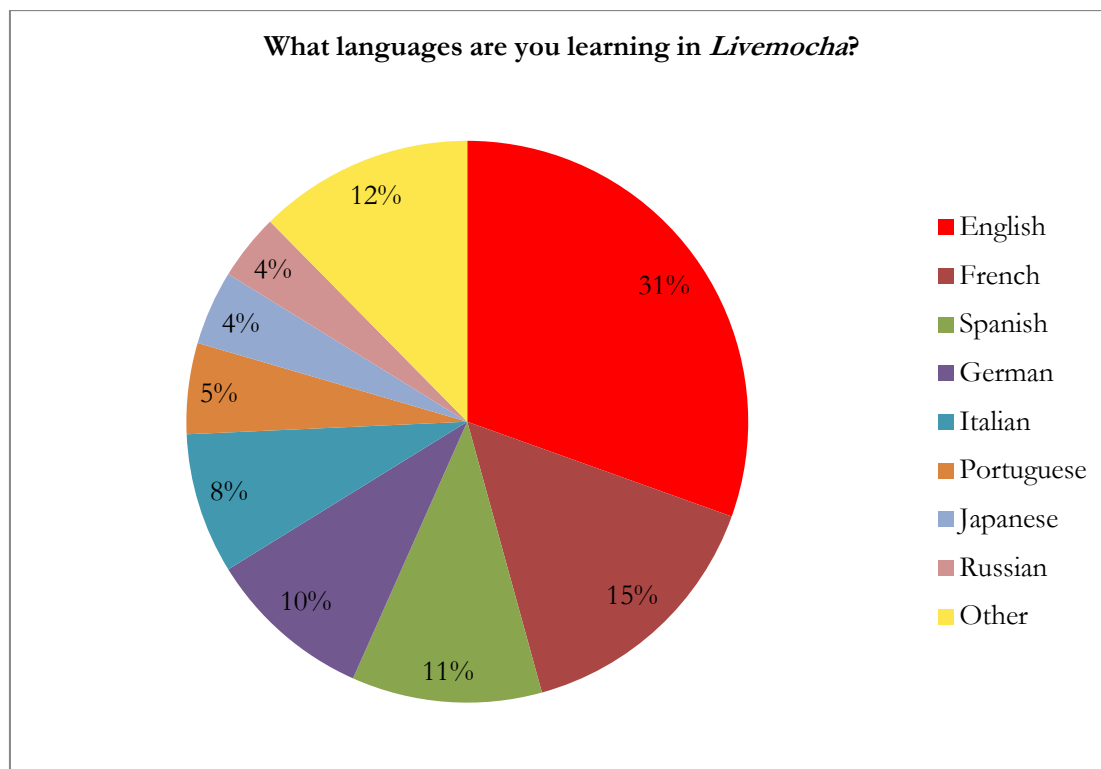


Fig. 3.7 Main languages learned in *Livemocha*

The picture emerging from figure 3.6, which combines the results of the English, the Spanish and the Italian questionnaire, is that English language dominates (31%) and that other representative languages are French (15%), Spanish (11%) and German (10%). In the “other” category fit other less popular languages such as Romanian (2 response count), Croatian (2 response count), Catalan (1 response count), Finnish (1 response count), Korean (1 response count), etc.

The second (Q.2) and the third questions (Q.3) aimed to find out learners’ level of exposure to foreign languages by asking if they had ever lived abroad and if they had language friends for language practice. Of the students surveyed, the majority (70%) had never lived abroad, which means that they might not have many occasions to practise the language in its natural settings and that they are learning their TL as a FL, that is, in a context where this is not the main spoken language. This might explain the reason why they inhabit the platform, that is, in order to find NSs to practice the TL with. Q7, which inquires the main reasons why learners learn in *Livemocha*, will shed more light on this issue and will confirm this assumption. Q.3 reveals that 34% of the learners have both online and offline contacts to practice a FL, while 23% report that they only have online friends to practise the TL. This is a very positive response and shows that learners

probably have created their offline and online network and that they combine their online experience on the platform with language courses or brief language experiences abroad. However, another 34% of the respondents stated that they have no friend to practice the TL and 8% of respondents maintained that they only have offline friends. The explanation to these last results may be two-fold: the absence of online language partners might be due to the fact these students have not had the opportunity to build their online network yet because they are novice to the platform. In fact, by looking at the time-factor table (see table 3.2) the amount of learners who had recently joined *Livemocha* is quite high (45%), including those who had signed up for the first time (10.5%) and those who had been members of the platform from 1 to 3 months (34.3%). The second explanation might be connected with their different learning style, which implies another type of educational use of the platform. Rather than being interested in the interaction with NSs through the chat, they express their preference for the didactic units provided in the platform and their contact with NSs would be mainly limited to each other's exercise correction with NSs of the TL selected randomly by the system itself.

The following section, labelled "Learners' Experience of *Livemocha*", aimed to find out learners' level of engagement to the online platform both in terms of time-factor and in terms of the type of activities undertaken and of the main factors motivating their engagement to the platform.

Section 2. Learners' Experience of Livemocha (Qs 5-10)

Qs. 5 and 6 were posed to have a quantitative overview of learners' level of commitment to *Livemocha*. One question (Q. 5) inquired about the duration of their membership to the platform and another question (Q. 6) asked for the frequency of their access to the platform, as shown in the following table:

Table 3.2 Duration and frequency of learners' activity in *Livemocha*

| | Number of learners | Percentage of learners |
|---|--------------------|------------------------|
| Q. 5. How long have you been a member of <i>Livemocha</i>? | | |
| I have just signed up for the first time | 11 | 10.5% |
| For 1-3 months | 36 | 34.3% |
| For less than 1 year | 19 | 18% |
| For 1-2 years | 31 | 29.5% |
| For over 3 years | 7 | 6.7% |
| I used to be a member, then I quit and now I am a member again | 1 | 1% |
| Totals | n = 105 | |
| Q. 6. How often do you login to your <i>Livemocha</i> account? | | |
| Daily | 19 | 18.1% |
| More than three times a week | 23 | 21.9% |
| Once or twice a week | 25 | 23.8% |
| Less than once a week | 9 | 8.6% |
| Approximately once or twice a month | 21 | 20% |
| I have not logged in for months | 8 | 7.6% |
| Totals | n = 105 | |

In relation to Q. 5, from table 3.2, it is possible to distinguish between two main categories of members. To the first category belong a significant share of people (almost 45%) who recently signed up, including those who have signed up for the first time (10.5%) and those who have been members of the platform from 1 to 3 months (34.3%). The second category embraces expert members (approximately 36%) who have inhabited the platform for 1 year or over (29.5% for 1-2 years and 6.7% for over 3 years).

With regard to Q. 6 about the frequency of learners' access to the online community, from the table it is inferred that the majority of respondents (63.8%) joined the platform at least once a week and that only 7.6% did not have logged in for months. This result

should not be surprising, taking into consideration that the survey was administered to those learners who had been active, that is, who had logged in to the platform in the previous month. What is worthy of reflection is that a frequent activity might be directly correlated both to the experts and to the novices of the platform. In the case of the former, joining the community might have become a consolidated habit after having built their own network; in the case of the latter joining the community might have turned into a form of “addiction”, as several novices interviewed maintained in the qualitative phase of this study. This last finding about novice members is consistent with previous studies (Brick, 2011; Clark & Gruba, 2010; Orsini-Jones, et al., 2013), which underlined a high level of initial motivation when joining *Livemocha* and, after the novelty factor, a progressive frustration leading to demotivation (Orsini-Jones, et al., 2013). A limitation of this survey consists in not have polled learners about the usual duration of their activity in the platform, the amount of time spent on it (1 hour/half an hour) and the quality of this time (continuous/discontinuous). However, the interview phase will provide a response to this issue. It is also important to note that the following items (Qs.7-8), by explaining the reasons for joining the community and the quality and the type of commitment to it, permit to deduce the amount of time spent by learners on the platform.

In Q.7, learners revealed the factors motivating their learning in the community, which led to interesting observations, as the following figure shows:

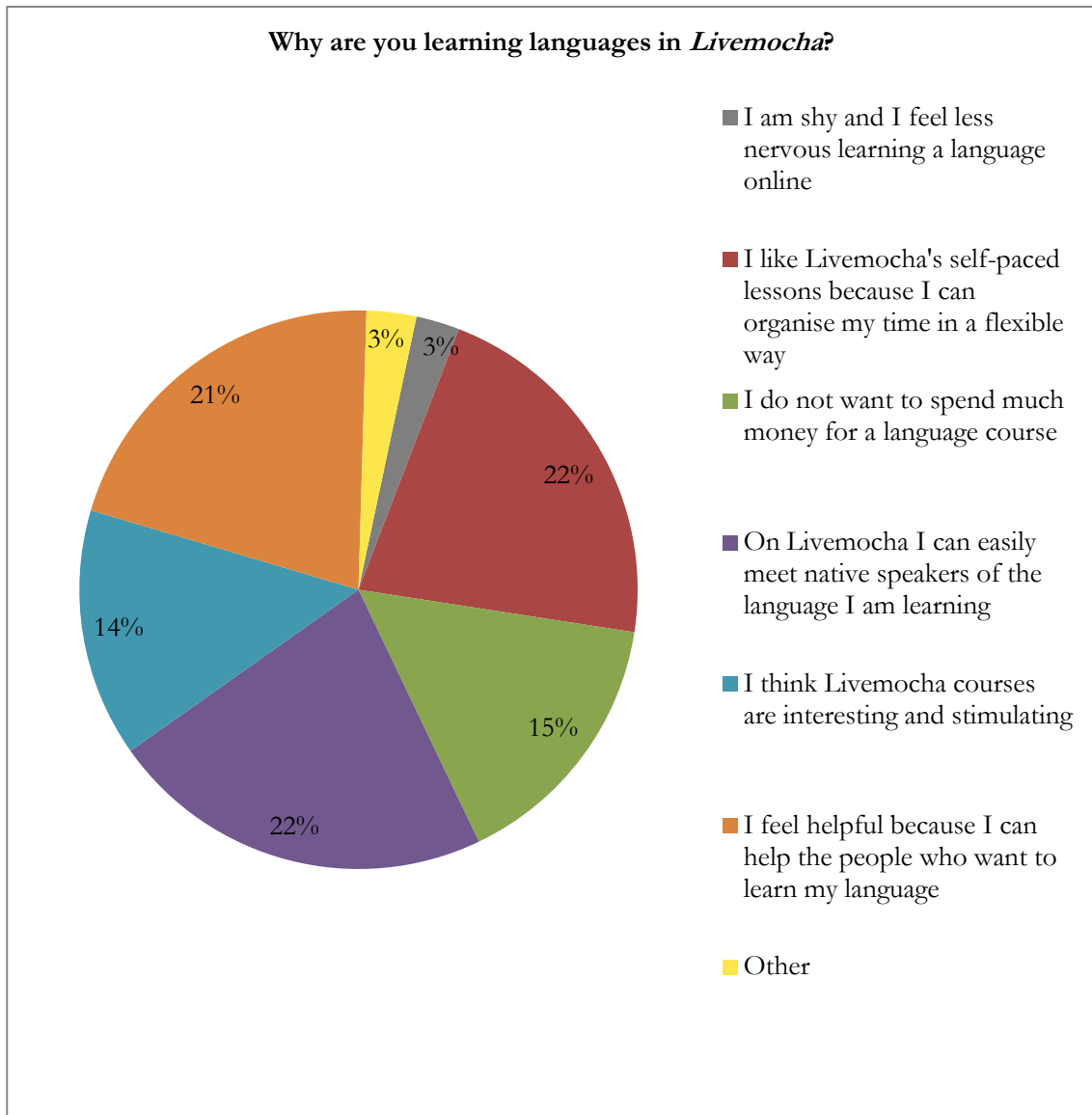


Fig. 3.8 Reasons for learning in *Livemocha*

As the pie chart illustrates, it is possible to distinguish between two main tendencies that are not in contrast between each other. On the one hand, there is learners' interest in the contact with native language for assistance offering (21% of those who answered "I feel helpful because I can help the people who want to learn my language") or for other aspects such as assistance or simply interaction seeking (22% of those who answered "In *Livemocha* I can easily meet native speakers of the language I am learning"); on the other hand, there is learners' interest in the courses provided by the platform represented by 22% of the respondents who selected their preference for the community's flexible, self-paced lessons. Another emerging theme is the free accessibility to the community (15%) and the interest in the didactic material (14%). However, in the "other" section, learners were asked to specify any other reasons why they enjoyed learning on the platform and one commentary pointed out that "the courses are useful if not always interesting". The interviews will clarify this aspect and will show a gradual decrease in learners' interest for the courses and its units, due to repetitive pattern drills exercises and to inaccuracies reported by students.

The following bar chart confirms the two main tendencies identified in the previous item and stresses even further the importance of the communication with NSs when inhabiting the community and the important role played by the didactic materials and the courses provided by the platform.

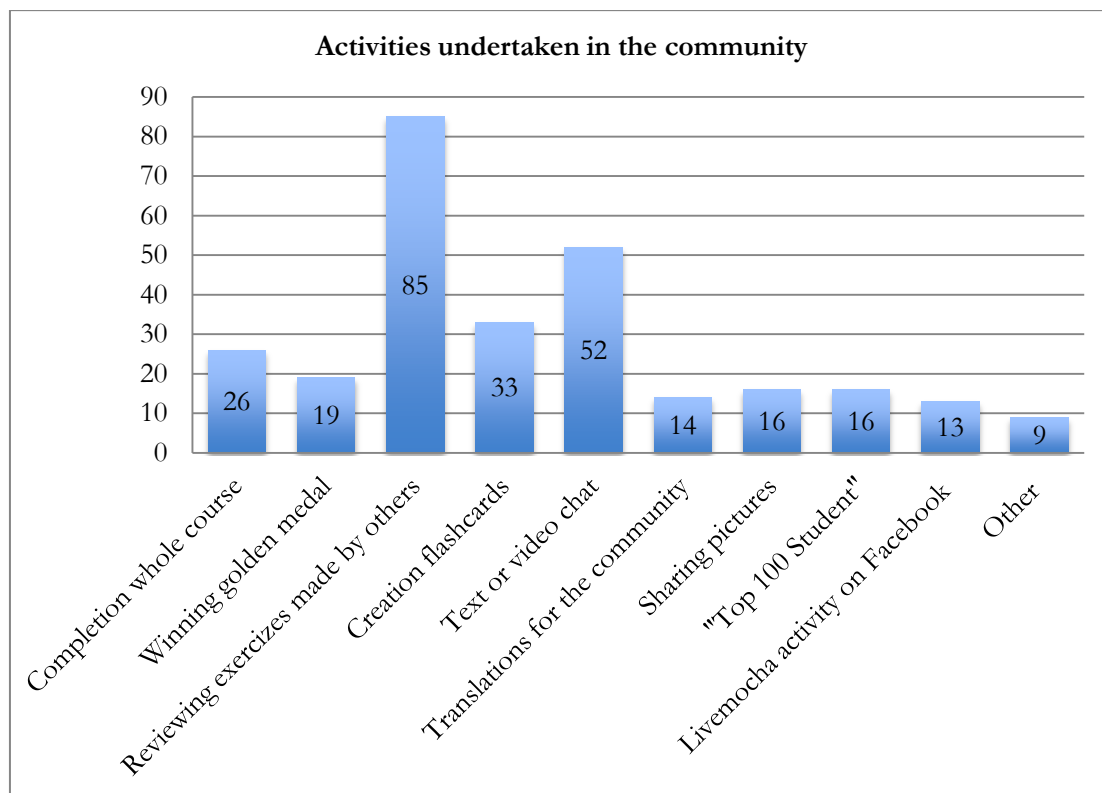


Fig. 3.9 Personal use of *Livemocha*

As it is possible to notice, the most common activity in *Livemocha* has been other learners' exercise revision, done by 85 respondents, which in all likelihood means that they have enrolled a course, they have done at least one exercise, submitted it for correction and, in exchange, corrected someone else's exercise probably suggested at random by the community system. This activity is followed by another activity, involving the text or the video chat of the community (52 respondents), which implies a more direct interaction with other learners, who are not necessarily NSs of the TL, who are chosen by learners themselves often among those suggested by the community. The number of those learners who devoted their time to the full exploration of the other affordances of the community is reduced, as the other item responses such as "creation of flashcards" (33 respondents), "sharing pictures" (16 respondents), "translations" (14 respondents) and "sharing *Livemocha* activity on *Facebook*" (13 respondents), demonstrate. Furthermore, a certain amount of members indicated that they had completed a whole course (26 respondents) and won the golden medal (19 respondents). Given that, in order to achieve these results on the platform, time and a more intense activity are needed, in all likelihood to these respondents correspond more expert and older users of the community.

In the following question (Q.9) learners were further inquired about the main reasons motivating their experience in the community and the results further confirm the main tendencies identified so far. They were asked to rank the importance of some given aspects when learning in *Livemocha* and it emerged that for 53% of them the most important aspect of learning in the community is to have the exercises revised by NSs, which further remarks the importance of being in contact with NSs. In fact, in ranking of importance, this item is immediately followed by “giving revisions to other learners” (26%) and “using the text and the video chat to talk with NSs (25%). The second most important aspect why they were learning in the community (indicated by 34% of the surveyed) was the fact that they are taking courses organized into units and lessons, which indicates that students appreciate the modalities of distribution of the learning content, resembling a formal course. Hence, the two main tendencies previously identified, that is, the interest for the didactic material and the contact with NSs, and the possibility to be helpful between peers, were highly rated, as this last question further demonstrates.

In response to question 10, roughly half of the students reported having benefited from the experience in the community, only 5% reported not having benefited at all and some of them (22%) found that they had only partially benefited. Others among the learners polled (23%) preferred not to reply to this question because they reported that they had not enough experience of the community yet. This is an important finding indicating that among the people surveyed there are newcomers. Since the survey was submitted to the people who had been active in the previous month, it is possible to deduce that among these people there is a good share of newcomers, which led me to the assumption that, after a period of more or less intense activity, there is a high level of drop-out on the platform by more expert learners. This assumption was then confirmed in the next phases of the investigation.

However, as the results of this survey illustrate, learners gave an overall positive feedback to their experience. The following section will inquire the main reasons why learners felt that the experience had been beneficial (or not) to their learning.

Section 3. Learners' Evaluation of Livemocha (Qs. 11-15)

The figure below reveals the results of question 11, asking why learners had positive feelings about learning on the platform.

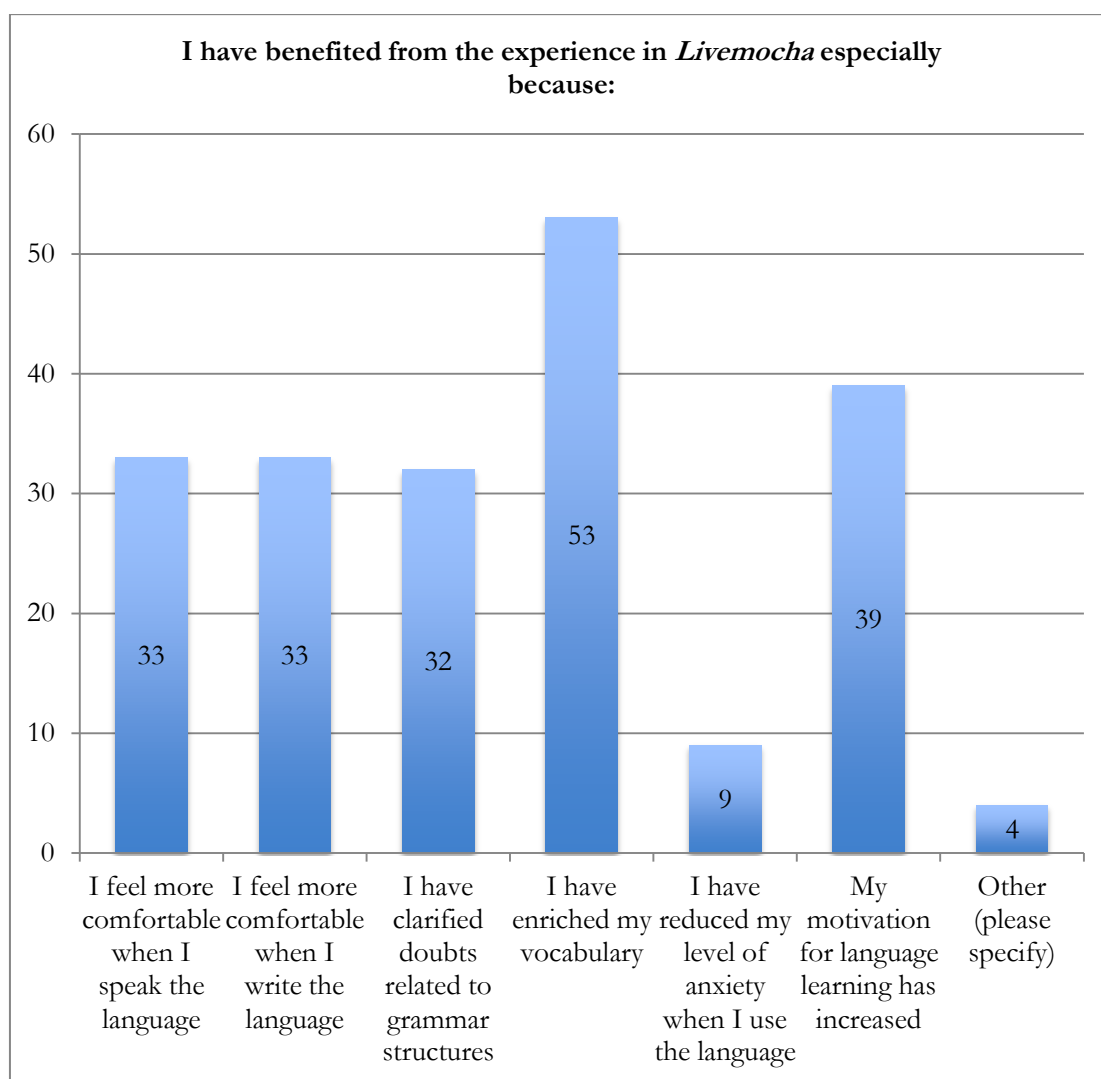


Fig. 3.10 Learners' evaluation of *Livemocha*'s benefits

As it is possible to observe, those who reported having benefited or partially benefited from the experience in the community, mainly considered that they had improved and enriched their vocabulary (53 respondents), their writing skills (33 respondents) and their speaking skills (33 respondents). The vocabulary improvement must be due to the rote-training exercises provided by the platform itself, which present lists of words and associations of words in the TL; whereas, the improvement of the writing and speaking skills might refer to the exercises of *Livemocha* but also to the chat with the NSs of the TL. Overall, 39 respondents selected that their motivation for learning increased on the platform, which suggest that the platform overall had a positive impact at least at the beginning of the learning process, which confirms Lin's (2012) findings about the positive perception of the platform.

In Qs. 12-13, the opinions of language learners are indicative of a generally positive perception of learning in the community and its affordances, although not particularly enthusiastic.

Table 3.3 Learners' opinions about learning in the online community

| Q. 12. Perceptions about learning in the community | | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total |
| 1. The sense of belonging to an online community increases one's willingness to study | 26.5% (27) | 48% (49) | 21.5% (22) | 2% (2) | 2% (2) | 102 |
| 2. Being part of an online community in a daily routine helps language learning | 25.4% (26) | 51% (52) | 19.6% (20) | 4% (4) | 0% (0) | 102 |
| 3. Learning in an online community is much more entertaining than learning in a traditional class | 18.6% (19) | 32.4% (33) | 30.3% (31) | 13.7% (14) | 5% (5) | 102 |
| Q. 13. Opinions about <i>Livemocha</i> | | | | | | |
| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total |
| 1. The design (the organization of the website content) in <i>Livemocha</i> is clear | 26% (27) | 57% (58) | 9% (9) | 7% (7) | 1% (1) | 102 |
| 2. There is much possibility of spontaneous interaction with the users | 34% (35) | 48% (49) | 15% (15) | 2% (2) | 1% (1) | 102 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|------------|-----------------|------------|------------|--------|-----|
| 3. The lesson content is stimulating and interesting | 17.4% (18) | 56% (57) | 17.4% (18) | 7.8% (8) | 1% (1) | 102 |
| 4. The community looks much more like a social network than like a learning place | 17% (17) | 43% (44) | 28.4% (29) | 10.6% (11) | 1% (1) | 102 |
| 5. Flashcards and learning contents are accurate and do not present mistakes related to pronunciation and translation | 13.6% (14) | 47% (48) | 25.4% (26) | 10% (10) | 4% (4) | 102 |

Learners perceive the sense of belonging to the community as a triggering factor for their learning process (48% of agreement) and as an everyday routine (51% of agreement). Fewer students considered that learning in the community is more entertaining than learning in a traditional class (32.4% of agreement). This may suggest that a formal course still plays an important role for learners and it might be mostly combined with online language activities. About the affordances of the community, learners did not report such a high level of satisfaction in relation to the user-friendly design and the content organization of the platform (57% of agreement). About half of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement made about the learning tools of the community and its accurate and stimulating activities. To this regard, open-ended items and qualitative interviews, will complete these data and will reveal the constraints of the platform, explaining the reason for this modest level of satisfaction. In particular, the statement “the community looks much more like a social network than like a learning place”, reported the lowest level of agreement (43%), which highlights that the learning aspect still plays a relevant role and it might infer that the social networking aspect is not seen as an element in contradiction with their learning activity, as the tricky question seemed to suggest.

However, despite the positive perception of *Livemocha* as a learning community, learners did not demonstrate to have a wide knowledge of the existing scenario for language learning and to be active users of other language communities. Q.15 revealed that the most known online community after *Livemocha* is *Busuu*, although only 17 respondents selected it and among them only 7 reported to be active users. To *Busuu* followed *Babbel* with 7 respondents, *Palabea* with 5 respondents, and other less popular communities mentioned just by 1 user each, such as:

Mylanguageexchange.com (<http://www.mylanguageexchange.com/>)

Languageexchange.com (<http://www.languageexchange.com/>)

Englishtown (<http://www.englishtown.com/>)

Real English (<http://www.real-english.com/>)

Turkish Class (<http://www.turkishclass.com/>)

The final part of the analysis included Q.14 and the last two open-ended questions (Qs. 21-22), addressed learners' opinions of using *Livemocha*, their interaction with their peers and other ideas and suggestions for improving their experience. Responses and comments give an insight into how online learners of *Livemocha* perceive their language experience in the community. Suggestions for improvement tackled very practical issues and dealt mainly with the following issues:

- a. Social networking features
- b. Reliability of the content of the platform
- c. Reliability of peer assistance
- d. Technical constraints

(a) One of the most consistent themes to emerge from the survey heightened awareness on the fact that learners evaluate the possibility of coming into contact with NSs from all over the world as something positive and as the principal feature attracting them, which is confirmed by previous studies (Lloyd, 2012). One learner, for example, said to have left the local class of Spanish he was taking, because this formal course devoted little time to speaking and listening skills practice and he preferred to interact in *Livemocha* and in *Languageexchange*. The following excerpt is representative of the observations made by

many respondents: *“I think it’s a funny and at the same time special way to learn and teach. I like to interact with different people sharing your same interests”*. Learners show awareness of the tandem experience and of the advantages deriving from possible language partnerships.

However, with regard to the social networking features of the community, the findings presented two main tendencies: on one side, learners are aware and recognise the social networking aspect of the platform. Some of them expressed the need of improving the interactional features of the platform and to have something more similar to a social network, suggesting, for example, the creation of specific groups of interest with *“curiosities about the Internet (...) more similar to a social network, with more activities to foster more participation”*. On the other side, it was possible to detect an opposite tendency, some perplexity about these social networking features, as the following excerpt suggests: *“some people adds you as a friend without having never interacted with you, in the sense that they have never correct none of your exercises and you have never reviewed none of their submission. They just add for adding people’s sake”*. This tendency might concern those students adopting a different learning style, much more focused on the exploration of the learning content than on the interaction with language partners, as the later interview phase demonstrated. In some cases, some learners revealed distrust when being “friended” by strangers and showed refusal for the social networking aspect of the platform. A student suggested eliminating learners’ facial pictures on learners’ profile in order to avoid cyberflirting episodes. Other students claimed that there are occasional problems with impolite users who do not respect the agreed rules of the community and post not suitable profile pictures and comments. Similarly, other learners reported having been victim of spam and hoaxing episodes through their private message box.

(b) As the results of this analysis show, the positive aspects of the platform mentioned by students include the free accessibility of its learning content and the flexibility of time and lesson organization it allows. Moreover, according to learners’ perceptions, learning materials do not fulfil learners’ satisfaction level. Learners reported that the learning units are a good and useful tool to enrich one’s vocabulary in the TL. However, in terms of didactic content and learning environment, the results indicate that the platform needs some improvement. Many students stressed the absence of grammar explanation and, at the same time, stressed their need for a more structured and articulated content. In addition, students highlighted that the basic level of grammar is not considered adequate to

people starting from more advanced levels and, in some cases, it is too difficult for beginners. This is congruent with what previous literature found about a “mismatch between claimed levels of materials and real level experienced” (Orsini-Jones, et al., 2013:48). In addition, the content does not always take into account that learning occurs by steps and is a gradual process. The following quote explains one learner’s view: “*in some questions, exercises, sentences, they take for granted that you have already acquired some knowledge and competencies but these aspects have not been faced in previous lessons*”.

Among the other problems, students mentioned the self-access learning material, which they considered as too basic and which, according to them, presented inaccuracies in the pronunciation, in the translations from one language into another and in the spelling. For this reason, some learners suggested the lesson content to be evaluated and monitored by native language experts. Learners also reported that difficult languages such as Russian, Arabic and Chinese are considered extremely tough to learn because of their different alphabet and the absence of explanation of the ideograms and/or the different alphabetic symbols. To this regard, one member suggested the introduction of the phonetic alphabet to simplify the learning process. Learners also mentioned their preference for practicing listening and speaking skills through real dialogues with NSs rather than the automated voice.

(c) Another discussed issue dealt with the quality of feedback and of comments received by the other people in the community. Some students complained about the little number of reviewers in some cases and the excessive number of revisions in other cases, generating repetitions in the mistake correction. In particular, members complained because of the lack of revision and/or prompt revisions from NSs and occasional absence of adequate peer assistance. Some students claimed that the feedback sometimes presents mistakes and inaccuracies. Learners are not evaluated as capable and competent peers in some cases, which is the reason why some learners suggested establishing a proper filter. One proposal was the following: “*The people should be forced to do exercise revision so that those who submitted their exercise can receive feedback. Long time has passed and nobody has corrected my exercises, which is disappointing and is not stimulating me to log in.*” This lack of reliability on the assistance provided by the other learners also concerned the informal learning practice of the community, that is, the communication through the chat. Students underlined that NSs are not always easily available in the chat: “*Sometimes I tried to*

contact connected friends in order to practice and I'd like it if they could show up online”, commented one of students.

(d) Other problems concerned some technical constraints such as the slowness of the site and of the chat system in particular. A student suggested adding a more advanced video call application, similar to a videoconference call, given the poor quality of the chat and the video chat. Some students raised the issue that the site is not enough interactive and should be more similar to a social network since there is a limited access to users and it is not easy to navigate between the friends' pages. Similar problems regarded the user-friendliness of the site, since some users complained not having been able to find the submissions sent by their friends and, as a consequence, to provide adequate feedback. It is possible that for this same reason, some students reported a not full understanding of all the community's affordances, such as the creation of the flashcards. Other technical problems were related to temporary blocks when accessing the languages, the private message delivery system and the lack of proper support for languages with different alphabets.

3.2.4. Discussion of the results

The results of this survey highlighted important issues regarding learners' perceptions of the experience in *Livemocha* online community and confirmed a number of basic assumptions about online learners and their use of online communities. These aspects are mainly connected with (1) learners' awareness of the didactic content of the platform, (2) with learners' awareness of its social networking features and (3) with learner's management of his learning process also in terms of the relations with their peers.

(1) The general trend of the questionnaire suggests that online learners considered their learning experience in *Livemocha* as something positive and beneficial. However, many of them demonstrated to be highly aware of the limitations regarding the learning content of the platform. According to learners' perceptions, it is in the area of content delivery and organization that the community needs meaningful development. Learners appreciate the self-paced lessons, the opportunity to learn at one's own rhythm and the possibility retrieve easily past lessons. Nevertheless, the repetition of the same typology of exercise is one of the main factors determining learners' abandonment of the platform.

Results also confirmed claims made by other studies in the field (Brick, 2011; Jee & Park, 2009; Liu et al., 2012; Stevenson & Liu, 2010). In this study, students' comments provide a very good example of the level of dissatisfaction with the learning content. Learners mentioned that they would like a wider range of lessons, more interactive units, less pattern drills exercises, more grammar explanation and more free content for the advanced level. Some ideas to differentiate and improve the didactic content concerned the insertion of reading texts suited to learners' different levels of proficiency in the TL, more stimulating composition writing, improvement of speaking skills through video-interviews, practice of more common sentences of the TL, more videos to improve conversational and pronunciation skills. Some students proposed a more interactional management of the didactic content in a "more learner generated content" modality evaluated by a jury of language experts, stating that the system does not give users the opportunity to upload didactic material and create exercises by their own to be corrected by the community. In addition, one student complained about the absence of a teacher and another one expressed the need for constant exercise submission, which might be interpreted as a signal of the need of being encouraged and pushed by a tutor or a teacher during the learning process.

(2) The results also provided information relating to a crucial factor that motivates learners' initial intense level of engagement in the community. The main triggering factor is the possibility to come into contact with people spread all over the world thanks to the social networking environment surrounding them. Learners mainly demonstrated to recognize, be aware and appreciate the social networking aspect related to the platform, as other studies confirmed (Liaw, 2011; Harrison & Thomas, 2009).

However, some learners mentioned that they would like the platform to be better organized visually and more user-friendly. To this regard, a student suggested adopting "more Facebook-like features" when looking for a language partner: "*Livemocha should make it easier to navigate through the list of friends. The current interface is cumbersome to use. For example, if I want to go to someone's page, which is the 46th of 50 pages of friends, I have to navigate through many other pages in the index first*". About the social networking features, students' comments stressed the importance of belonging to the same community of learners and highlighted that they benefited the most when talking to NSs of the TL. In this regard, there was one learner who admitted of not being interested in the didactic content of the platform and highlighted that the community should have more social-networking features, as the

following quote suggests: *“I would make it more into social networking, using text exchange and audio video exchange more, this is where the real benefits are over a classroom (...). I think you meet interesting people as well and, although it’s not a dating site, you form friendships in a non threatening way, (...) I’m solely interested in the opportunity to meet native speakers”*. This led me to the assumption that in the interview phase it was necessary to investigate deeper learners’ social behaviour when experiencing the social network, how and what type of relations they tended to intertwine, what kind of networks they were able to form and with what purpose.

(3) One of the emerging themes is learners’ management of their learning process within and outside of the community. Learners evaluate as very important the opportunity of learning more languages without any cost of money and time, since some of them underscored not to have money and time to attend face-to-face courses. However, it emerged that this type of non-formal practice on the online community is often combined with the attendance of a formal course and the *Livemocha* experience is considered as a training support to prepare the exams provided by formal institutions. One learner reported that he did not understand some phonetic aspects of his TL since they were not explained in the platform and that for this reason, decided to quit and enrol a face-to-face formal course. Once achieved a better level of understanding of the basic elements of his TL, he joined the platform again with a specific intention: *“I inhabit Livemocha more for practising and learning two or three more words than for learning the language in itself. I think it’s good if you combine it with face-to-face classes, but it cannot be the only tool.”* This is a sign of awareness of the affordances of the community and a sign of learner autonomy. Students in general seemed to recognise up to what level they could take advantage of the community’s affordances and to have reflected on its limitations and constraints. In this sense, they took responsibility of their own learning and orientated their learning towards a more strategic learning.

The findings also highlight the importance issues of learners’ management of their relationship with language peers and the awareness of the inadequate feedback some learners provide to the community. The picture that emerges is that learners possess the skills and knowledge necessary to train their language skills in the community but not always to provide the adequate feedback. The following quote exemplifies the ways in which online learners reflect on the inadequate level of peer assistance: *“Ensure that reviewers were*

sufficiently competent to provide feedback (...) members should be given a badge based on the quality of their reviews. This would give members a level of confidence on the feedback they received. Too many people are just making comments, as distinct from providing feedback, in order to gain points". This student also suggested extending the 3-point feedback present on the platform and making it mandatory so that the community would acknowledge the reviewer's work and the reviewer would have the sensation of having spent his time in a productive way by collaborating with his peers. This is a sign of the fact that learners are aware of the value of their contributions and expect it to be recognised by the community. In addition, they also expect being treated in the same way when peers offer their assistance; this suggests that the principle of reciprocity is one of their main triggering factors to their engagement to the community.

The 22 items in the questionnaire were constructed with the attempt to answer part of the research questions of this study. It is important at this point to return to the questions that were the starting point for this study. As previously outlined, the first research question is:

1st Question. What kinds of opportunities for L2 use occur in the online communities for L2 learning and what social and contextual factors affect and contribute to the construction of such opportunities and to learners' perceptions of L2 learning?

In relation to this main question, the survey mainly addressed the sub-questions related to *learners' behaviours and performance*. These sub-questions were:

- a. How do different uses of online communities and different patterns of behaviour contribute to different opportunities for L2 use?
- b. How (if) do learners take advantage of the conditions of self-learning that the uncontrolled learning environment of online communities offer?

In relation to question a, from the survey it emerged that there are two main drivers orienting learners' activities within platform, that is, the contact with NSs and the use of didactic resources. This raised the hypothesis that these two drivers might orientate different types of learners with different types of learning behaviours. Therefore, I distin-

guished two broad categories of learners' profiles. To the first profile belong those learners who make a wide use of didactic resources, to the second those who decided to opt for the social networking features of the community. Hence, I hypothesised that the interactional opportunities of those belonging to the first profile are more restricted, since they would simply be limited to the peer-to-peer review of the online exercise submission. On the contrary, to the second profile belong the people attracted by the social networking features of the community and willing to create a network of language partners through the chat. These hypotheses will be confirmed in the interview phase and learners' profiles will be fine-grained and analysed in details.

In relation to question b, the survey provided some insight about learners' perceptions of learning in the uncontrolled environment of social networks and about their awareness of their condition of self-learning within the community. By the means of this survey it was not possible to find an exhaustive answer to these questions. It emerged that learners are aware of the uncontrolled environment of social networks but they do not perceive it as "uncontrolled", since the self-paced lessons and the organization of the learning material tend to resemble the type of learning occurring in formal environments. They appreciate this aspect. In addition, some of them complained about the absence of a teacher and the guaranties of accuracy and reliability deriving from a formal course. However, it emerged that many among them do not usually expect from the platform more than it can actually offer. Therefore, they seem to respond to this condition by managing their own learning in such a way to use the platform as a support and as a training tool. At the same time, many of them recognised that the platform represents a valuable opportunity to practise the language with NSs, which in a formal course is not always a common practice. These aspects will be subjected to further confirmation and in-depth analysis in the following phases of this study.

The other subquestions of the study cover the area of *peer assistance* and are:

- a. Is there any evidence of effective peer assistance receiving and provision? Are learners aware of the reciprocity or lack of it between themselves and their peers?

- b. What kind of assistance do learners provide to each other? What strategies do learners enact to foster their peers' improvement in the L2 during the dyadic interactions?

The survey did not provide answers to question b and could in part answer question a.

In relation to question a, the survey provided evidence of the fact that learners are aware of the “reciprocity agreement” with their peers. To this regard, some learners complained that they did not receive feedback by peers, other learners reported that not everybody were capable of offering adequate feedback. Peer assistance proved to be a key-factor in this sense because it mainly determined learners' dropout or faithfulness to the platform. Starting from these first discoveries, the interview phase will dig into this issue by explaining what types of peer assistance learners expected to receive and offer and what types of peer assistance they actually receive and provide. In addition, the phase of the collection of the online interactions will provide concrete evidence of some specific forms of peer assistance they exchange once they have found a language partner or created their language partner network. Phase IV (collection of online interactions) will also show examples of failure of peer assistance provision and examples of successful peer assistance provision, and will try to explain the reason why learners failed or succeeded. In this way, it will be possible to answer question b.

The second main question is the following:

2nd Question. What are the affordances and constraints of the online communities for L2 learning in relation to their effectiveness for long-term learning outcomes?

The subquestions were:

- a. Is learners' engagement with online communities maintained, increased or decreased over time?
- b. What is the relationship between the maintenance, decrease or increase of learners' engagement with the platform over time and (1) the social affordances, (2) the didactic affordances and (3) any other practice or environmental issue?

This survey was a valuable support to answer in part some questions related to the *time-factor* within the community and to the learners' level of engagement. For example, it emerged that there is a wide amount of inactive users and that among the most active users there are many novice users. This means that there is a decrease of engagement over time, which was confirmed by the previous literature (Brick, 2011; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Jee & Park, 2009; Liaw, 2011; Stevenson & Liu, 2010).

To answer the subquestions about the factors affecting learners' engagement, from the survey it emerged that there is a strong correlation between learners' engagement and the learning activities provided by the platform. In addition, there is a key-factor stimulating learners' activities and determining learners' engagement to the platform, that is, prompt and adequate peer assistance provision and offering. As previously outlined, learners are aware of the importance of the reciprocity between peers but seem not to be adequately trained and competent to provide correct assistance. This is because they are experts of the language but not teachers. Another problem that emerged regards the fact that it is difficult for learners to create bonds and to intertwine contacts with their language partners because many of them are not immediately available in the chat. This is due to the fact that they are inactive users, that they use the platform in a different way or that they distrust the interactional aspect of *Livemocha*. This missing trust component is in part due to the fact that these online communities use the concept of a SNS such as *Facebook*, which usually strengthen the bonds among users who are already in contact in their off-line lives, and apply it to users who do not previously know each other.

The survey results helped with the preparation of the following phases of the methodology, which aimed to find out the reasons why older and more expert users remained "faithful" to the platform, which aspects affected learners' engagement and whether there was a correlation between their engagement and the contacts intertwined with other people. The interview phase will investigate this issue more in depth by analysing the types of ties learners are able to intertwine, how the creation of these relationships influences the process, and how they develop. The next phases will also show other factors affecting learners' gradual disengagement over time.

To conclude, the interview phase and the online interaction phase will allow for a deeper examination of the types of assistance occurring in the community, of learners' percep-

tions about their condition of self-learning and their relationship with their peers, of the type of opportunities they create for using the language and on the different patterns of behaviour they established within the community

3.3. From the online survey to the online interviews

As anticipated in the introductory part of the analysis, the results of this survey and the three open-ended questions provided me with the coordinates to structure the interview script and to address these themes more in depth, with the aim to understand better learners' process of construction of opportunities to use the TL and of taking advantage of their online learning experience. The fourth, qualitative phase of the investigation (phase IV, *interviews*) started with the interview sample and the preparation of the interview script, as described in the following section.

3.3.1. Method: the interviews

As anticipated in section 3.3, one of the objectives of the survey was to seek people to interview for this next phase. In order to accomplish this goal, the researcher created a Google information form²⁰. Those who replied anonymously the survey, after the survey submission, were redirected to the researcher's page explaining that more help was required for the investigation and that the investigator needed to interview some of them. The page was provided with an email form, and the respondents were invited to offer their help by leaving their emails in an online box that was connected to the researcher's email address and to a Google doc. Then, the researcher collected the contacts (mainly emails and/or *Skype* addresses) of those learners who accepted to be interviewed.

This study employs two types of interviews: semi-structured interviews, which will be described in this section, and stimulated recall interviews (addressed to the case studies, see chapter 4, section 4.1.3), which appear to be the most common methods to elicit verbal commentaries in the field of language cognition (Borg, 2006). This initial phase revolved around semi-structured interviews. This kind of interview follows an "interview guide approach" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008:205) and does not address specific and fixed questions in a standardized manner as in the case of structured interviews. Rather, it allows more flexibility because, dealing with a set of general topics to tackle and without following a very rigid order in the series of questions, the interview can be conducted

²⁰ The webpage is the following and it is available in four languages, English, Spanish, Catalan and Italian (<https://sites.google.com/site/investigadorauoc/home>).

with a certain amount of freedom and take some other directions. This means that I had an interview protocol (a script) written beforehand outlining the main topics to be covered, but then during the interview I did not have to follow any particular order. The reason for this choice is that these types of interviews not only are commonly used in educational research, but also they better adapt to the interpretative paradigm of this study, where a limited amount of respondents are interviewed in-depth and where the interview consists in an interaction between researcher and respondent intertwining a relationship in which the respondent feel free to respond the interview as if it was more a conversation than an investigation (Borg, 2006; Kvale, 1996). As a consequence of this more symmetrical relationship between interviewer and interviewee, other advantages of semi-structured interviews is that the interviewees feel more at ease when answering the questions and are more involved in the process, therefore, their accounts are usually more detailed and the outcome is richer qualitative data (Anderson & Burns, 1989). Moreover, the wide presence of open-ended questions helped participants report their experience and practices and express their beliefs by using their own words and their own personal views so that the risk of misinterpretation by the researcher is lower (Borg, 2006; Kvale, 1996).

The objective of these semi-structured interviews was to elicit verbal commentaries about L2 learners' main practices, beliefs, attitudes and patterns of behaviour when inhabiting these communities. Being this ethnographic phase of study holistic, it involves a rich and accurate description of the characteristics of the learners of the communities, how and when they interact with one another, what practices they enact, how they create their networks, and what their norms and rules are. When the researcher encountered themes and statements that needed further exploration and clarification, more probing sub-questions were asked, given that the advantage of this interview format is to allow flexibility without following a fixed path. In such a way, it was possible both to pre-determine the data gathered and to deal with the unexpected data that arose during the process.

The interview script (see Appendix C) was structured in a series of headings corresponding to different sections within which there were set of questions or probes to guide the researcher, as follows: the first section regarded learners' language background and inquired about their L1, their TL, whether they had studied it as a FL or as a SL, and about

their network of language friends. The second section included questions about learners' use of the platforms, their main activities, the reasons why they joined the communities, and how they carry out their language practice. The third section dealt with the time-factor in relation to learners' activities in the communities (e.g. frequency, duration of their membership, etc.) and the fourth section consisted of more broad questions asking about their general opinion about the communities, if they perceived they had benefited from the experience and how they would improve it if they could. More sensitive data about their demographic background (e.g. age, level of education, country of origin) emerged throughout the interview. Finally, the fifth and last section explored learners' interactional aspect in the communities. For this part of the interview I followed the "interaction interview" format (Kurata, 2011; Muraoka, 2000; Neustupný, 1994, 2003), which is described as a retrospective method useful to investigate learners' linguistic behaviour, speech events and interactional situations with very specific questions related to the context in which the interaction occurred (Kurata, 2011).

The first cycle of interviews was submitted between December 2011 and March 2012. Being the present study longitudinal, a second cycle of interviews was necessary to assess learners' engagement to the platform over time and to answer the second main question of the study about time factor. This second cycle of interviews was submitted 10 months after the first, in the arch of time of October and November 2012 as an online questionnaire. The questions aimed to discover (see appendix F) the reasons why learners' engagement to the platform had maintained constant, had increased or had decreased in such an arch of time. The questions also regarded their perceptions about their improvements in their language learning over time, their perceptions of changes related to the platforms, and perceptions of changes related to the development of their network of friends.

The next sections will explain the submission procedure and will enter the core of the analysis.

3.3.2. Subjects and data collection

The interview process (1st cycle) started by contacting the participants through a letter of invitation sent in electronic format to those who replied anonymously the survey and later were redirected to the researcher's Google site and invited to leave their emails. The

letter of invitation was very brief, it was provided with a link to the Google site and to the university page of the researcher, it described shortly the purpose of the study, it included some questions about the best time and day in which the participants wanted to be interviewed, and invited them to choose the modality in which the interview had to be carried out.

Participants who submitted their emails and did not answer the invitation letter were sent a further invitation through a follow-up email. In the end, among the people who answered the survey through the *Livemocha* administration and submitted their email, only 11 were interviewed. As I mentioned in the previous section (3.2.2), 102 members of *Livemocha* in total completed the survey and 32 out of them accepted being interviewed. Nevertheless, only 11 out of the 32 who gave their availability were actually interviewed in the end and answered the invitation email.

Therefore, this time I had to seek other interviewees directly and not through the official channels of the platform, drawing on the platforms themselves and searching among online members at random. The only parameters were to keep a balanced number between men and women and to look for people over 18 years old with whom I could communicate in Spanish, Italian or English. At the end, 45 participants were found for the interviews. In this way, by not all of them belonging to the same group of survey respondents, it was possible to obtain further evidence and to confirm or disconfirm the survey results.

The 45 semi-structured interviews were taken in an arch of time of four months (December 2011-March 2012). The duration of the interview ranged from 20 minutes to 2 hours, depending on the support used to do it (*Skype*, email, online chat, face-to-face), according to the participants' preference, on the sociability of the people interviewed, on their more or less intense activity and experience on the online platforms, on their time availability (a couple of interviews have been split into 2 or 3 sessions), on their level of understanding of the researcher's language, and on the presence of technical impediments (such as low-speed Internet connection in the case of some interviewees).

With regard to the second cycle of interviews, which occurred approximately 10 months after the first, only 20 out of the original 45 interviewees, answered. This number in-

cludes the three case studies that will be treated in chapter 3. This second cycle of interviews was a precious source of information because it contributed to shed more light on the time factor issue.

3.3.3. Codification

The interviews that were recorded (*Skype* interviews) were transcribed word-for-word. All the others, occurred by means of other textual supports, were archived. In order to facilitate the phase of transcription, a specific software was used, *Audiotranscription.de F4*. Each typed transcript was analysed following thematic coding around categories corresponding to the research questions. In fact, the data analysis process started with the coding process, that is, with the identification of recurring words and ideas, which were then flagged as possible themes. Disposing of an extensive amount of data consisting of 45 interviews of long duration, the coding process occurred through the aid of *Atlas.ti*, a software for qualitative analysis.

Coding consisted in organizing the transcribed data into junks of segments of text before attributing meaning to these pieces of information (Creswell, 2009). The codes were supported by quotations found in my transcripts and, in turn, generated themes. Codes and themes were interrelated and later interpreted. The method chosen to analyse the interviews was “thematic analysis” (Braun & Clark, 2006:78), which is considered as the basic method for qualitative analysis and has the advantage of allowing pre-coding based on pre-determined categories and post-coding, and the identification of new categories at the end of the codification (Meier & Daniels, 2011).

In the initial stage of data analysis, transcripts of the interviews were analysed in order to observe reoccurring patterns and themes and to later generate possible categories for coding learners’ perceptions, experience and patterns of interaction in the context of these social networks. Then, the analysis process followed a top-down approach. I started from a pre-established set of codes that I applied to the data collected because I analysed data by fitting it within the theoretical model. This pre-determined framework was made of categories and sub-categories, that is, of *families of codes* and *codes* creating hierarchies and connections among them. Before starting the analysis, three faculty experts in CALL and online ethnography were asked to cross-check the codes and themes created in order to obtain a further improvement and refinement of codes and themes. Moreover, during the analysis, some bottom-down codes emerged and were codified as

“IN-VIVO codes”. These are related to the interviewees’ speech. I selected a word pronounced by them and this word automatically became the code. This was useful to identify emerging patterns and frameworks because I wanted to be open to learners’ perspectives. In order to avoid misunderstandings and overlapping definitions in the qualitative data collected under analysis, for each code and family of code memos with commentaries were created. Once the topics and themes were defined, in the memos I related them to the existing literature. Following the qualitative content analysis of interviews conducted with 45 participants codes and themes were identified, from which sub-codes and sub themes originated. The results were analysed using a combination of axial coding and thematic analysis to ascertain how codes and themes were tied and connected to each other. At the end of the process, 134 codes were found belonging to 10 families of codes.

As the figure below shows (see figure 3.11), the 10 families of codes are divided into 2 broad categories, conceptual families and descriptive families.

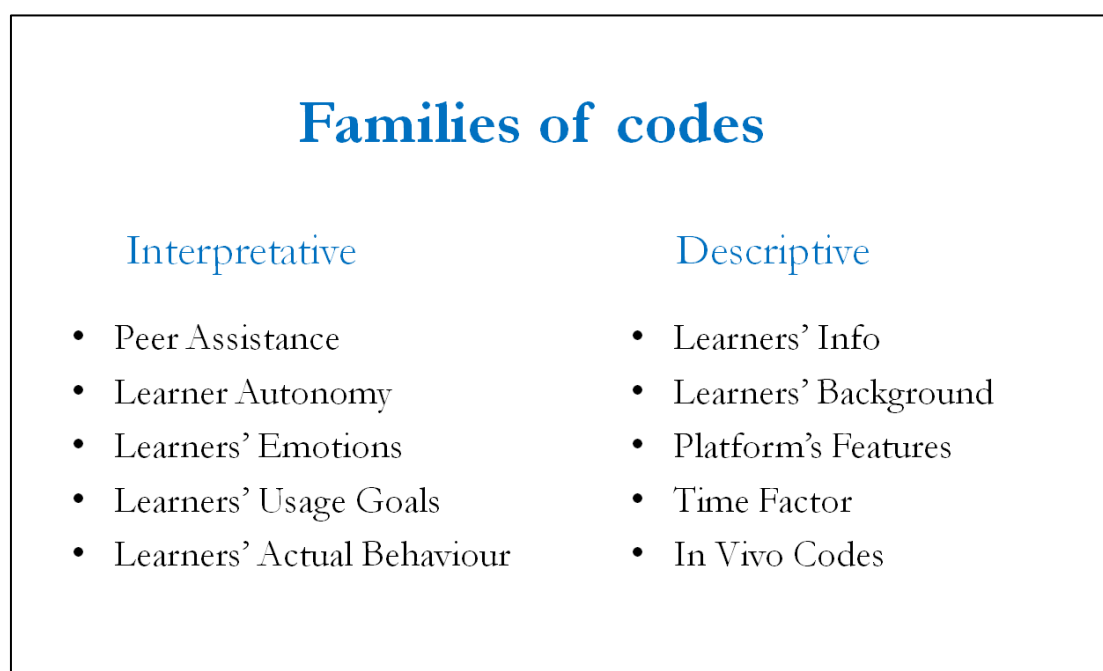


Fig. 3.11 The 10 families of codes split into 2 main categories

With regard to the categorization, the analysis proceeded according to two main criteria: description and interpretation.

Hence, the **DESCRIPTIVE CATEGORY** includes families of codes that help organize the information. This information regards the features of the learners interviewed and the features of the platforms of *Livemocha* and *Busuu*.

The family called **Learners' info** refers to general information about the interviewees, such as their gender, age and country of origin and whether they are studying the TL as a FL or as a SL. An example of how these data were represented by codification is: *Age group::18-24*, *Gender::female*, and so forth.

The family called **Learners' background** provides further information about the interviewees as learners and is related to their experiences abroad, to their proficiency level of the TL and to their level of digital literacy. Example of codes for this category are: *Digital literacy::skilled*, *Digital literacy::unskilled*, *Stays abroad::long*, *Stays abroad::none or just travelling*.

The family called **Platform's features** deals with affordances and constraints of the platforms under both a pedagogical and technological point of view. "Technological affordance" is a term commonly employed to describe the rich environment of applications and Internet based tools. To this category belong codes such as the following: *PF::free content*; *PF::grammar missing*; *PF::reported modality of interaction_textual chat*, *PF::randomness of interaction*.

The family called **Time factor** provides information about the frequency learners have access to *Busuu* and *Livemocha* and about when they joined the platforms. Example of codes for this family are: *TF::FREQUENCY_monthly*, *FREQUENCY_weekly*, *TF::User_expert*, *TF::User_novice*.

The family called **In Vivo Codes** embraces all the codes suggested by learners themselves using their own words, which contribute to a better description of their experience. Examples of such codes are *VIVO::addiction*, *VIVO::dating agency* and *VIVO::overcoming boundaries*. These codes emerged during the process of analysis and had not been previously established as for all the others.

The **INTERPRETATIVE CATEGORY** includes families of codes helping in the interpretation and clarification of learners' behaviours and feelings about the platform. The families are the followings.

The family called **Learner Autonomy** retrieves the common definition of it in the existing literature (see chapter 2, section 2.2.3) and applies it to the learners interviewed. These definitions are:

“Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981:3)

“Autonomy is essentially a matter of the learner’s psychological relation to the process and content of learning” (Little, 1991:4)

Therefore, according to these definitions, the codes adopted for this family are mainly indicators of learner autonomy. Evidences of learner autonomy are coded as:

LA::Awareness of reciprocity

This definition, together with the concept of autonomy, is at the basis of tandem learning and many interactions in online communities seem to obey this principle. The principle of reciprocity is related to the idea of mutual exchange. When both participants benefit equally, the interaction is successful (see chapter 2, section 2.2.3).

LA::Metacognition

Learners reflect on their own language progress and make their own choices. For example in searching, discriminating and evaluating the online resources available to achieve a given goal.

LA::Critical Digital Literacy

This is “the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process” (Martin, 2006: 135-136). This code identifies the level of social media skills and usage of the learners of these online communities, if they were familiar with technology, and if they relied on the web for information, both in general and with reference to L2 learning.

The family called **Peer assistance** has the goal to show how peer assistance manifests and what conditions favour it, what its key-features are, what strategies learners use to deal with it and what are the consequences of these strategies. This category is particularly important for tandem language because the codes it includes contribute establishing and cementing partner relationships. In the context of this thesis, peer assistance is used as a broader category beyond peer feedback. It includes peer feedback (which will be treated in detail in the analysis of the online interactions in chapter 4) and other forms of aid such as sharing didactic resources, technical assistance with the use of technologies, and emotional support beyond the learning trajectory.

This family is divided into two subcategories, “peer assistance seeking” and “peer assistance provision” and the contribution of each learner to L2 learning was classified into different terms to which correspond different codes. Some examples of peer assistance episodes are:

In terms of emotional support: *PA::emotional support beyond learning trajectory*

In terms of technical support: *PA:: technical assistance*

In terms of pedagogical support: *PA::sharing intercultural pragmatics*. This is about providing and seeking cultural information. It consists in making connections between language, society and culture of the country of reference, taking into account one’s personal experience.

PA::grammar explanation. This form of assistance is usually connected to an error correction episode. It refers to participants who correct their peers and receive corrections and it is about sharing one’s own grammar knowledge and use of the structures. When it occurs, this is considered as an evidence of the fact that learners are aware of their learning process and are monitoring their L2 performance.

The family called **Learners’ affections/emotions** identify the feelings of learners while inhabiting the platforms. Examples of codes are: *LE::distrust*, *LE::boredom*, *LE::enthusiasm*.

The family called **Learners' Usage Goals** embraces learners' goals before joining the platform or at the beginning of their activities on the platform. This category is different from the category "Learner's actual behaviours". Some examples are: *LUG::social networking for friendship*, *LUG::social networking for learning*, *LUG::use of didactic resources*.

The family called **Learners' Actual Behaviour** refers to learners reporting about their platforms' usage and about the features explored after having joined the platform. This category is different from "Learner's Usage Goals". Some examples are: *LAB::social networking for friendship*, *LAB::social networking for learning*, *LAB::use of didactic resources*.

The aforementioned codes were assigned to the quotations of the interviewees. The nature of these quotations consisted in sentence selection and quotation memos to explain why a given slice was selected. In addition, between the so called *lumper* and *splitting* code the latter was adopted. These types of coding are defined as such: "Lumping gets to the essence of categorizing a phenomenon while splitting encourages careful scrutiny of social action represented in the data" (Saldaña, 2009:20). In other words, *splitting* splits data into smaller codable moments and generates a more nuanced analysis from the start.

3.3.4. Analysis

A detailed qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts was carried out to collect community members' stories from different perspectives and collating different type of information according to each learner, who is holder of his own way to look at the online community. Working in the framework of an interpretative paradigm, I had to distinguish between my informants' statements and my own interpretation of them, trying to draw out personal biases that might have influenced the study.

The analysis of the informants' data then allowed for the examination of the social and contextual factors that affect the use of the language in these communities. Firstly, I will provide some information about the interviewees selected in the two communities. The people interviewed (1st cycle) are made of 24 females and 21 males (n = 45) from several countries.

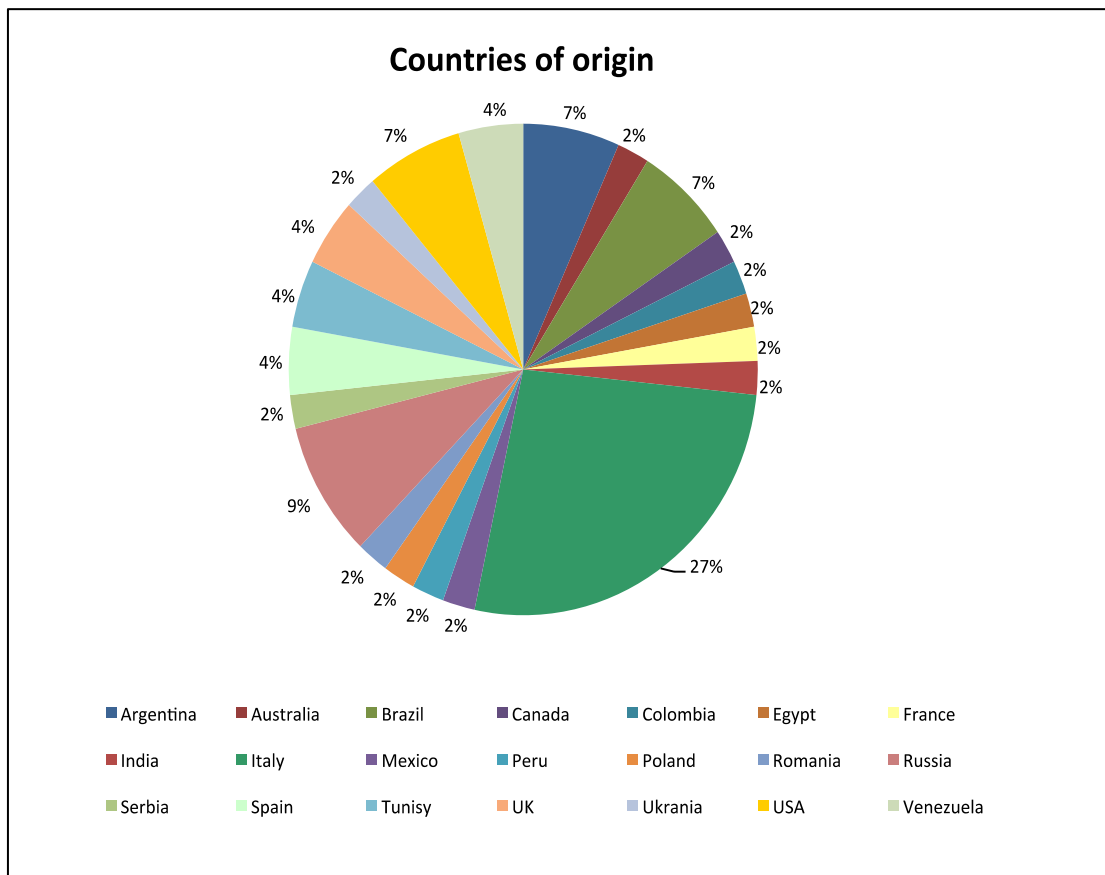


Fig. 3.12 Country of origin of the interviewees

As the chart above shows, there is a significant slice of Italian people (27%), since the interviews were conducted in English, Spanish and Italian, the languages known to the interviewer. Instead, especially the people with whom I spoke English and Spanish, are spread in several different countries, which are not necessarily countries where English and Spanish are the official languages.

The TL of the people interviewed are mainly English (29%) and Spanish (18%), which should not be surprising, considering that they are the most studied languages in the world.

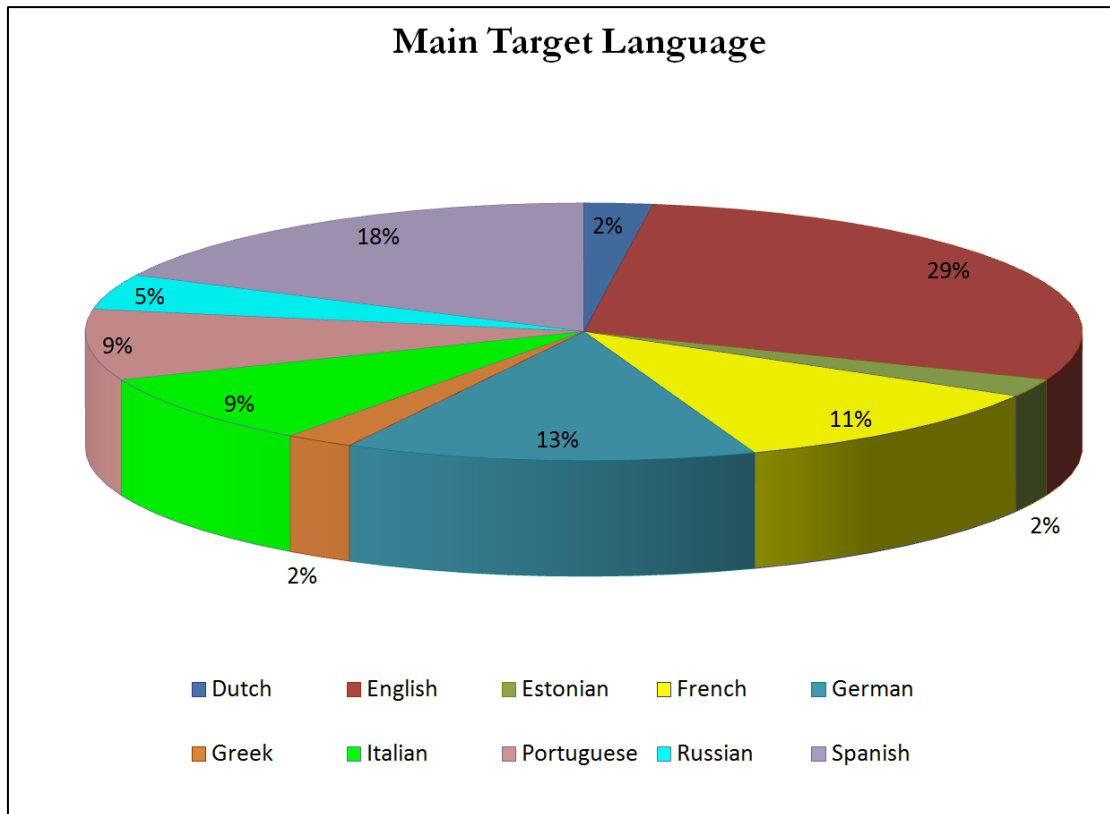


Fig. 3.13 Main TL of the interviewees

More difficult languages such as Russian and Greek are less represented (respectively 5% and 2%). This might be due to the fact that the platforms do not provide an explanation of non Roman alphabets and do not allow typing other characters. Several interviewees raised complaints about this issue.

As graphic 3.14 illustrates, the population is quite represented in all age groups.

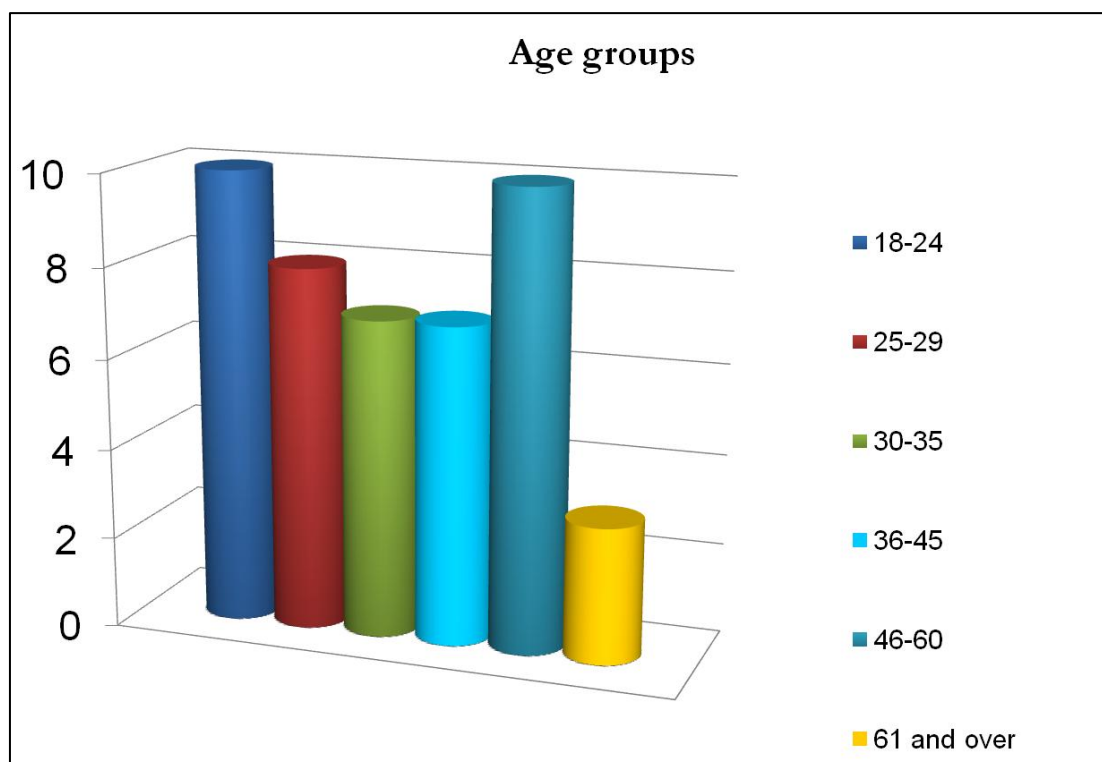


Fig. 3.14 Age groups of the population interviewed

The most represented age groups are (18-24) and (46-60) and the least represented is the group (61 and over). This demonstrates that these L2 online communities have an appeal to online language learners independently of their age. In addition, the data analysis revealed that the majority of the people interviewed (42/45) are digitally literate and have at least basic computer skills.

The vast majority of the people interviewed are *Livemocha* users (44/45), a smaller portion is both a *Busuu* and a *Livemocha* user (17/45) and a minority (11/45) is also a user of other platforms. These platforms include:

- popular language communities (some of them had been already mentioned in the survey analysis) such as *Babbel*, *Palabea*, *Languageexchange*, *12speak* (<http://www.12speak.com/>), *VerbalPlanet* (<http://www.verbalplanet.com/>);
- less known communities dedicated to learning one specific language, such as *Parlacatalà* (<http://www.parlacatala.org/>) and *donQuijote* (<http://www.donquijote.com/>);
- forums such as *Forum Romania Italia* (<http://www.romania-italia.net/homepage/>) and *Mundolatino* (<http://www.mundolatino.ru/>)

- other kinds of communities not designed for L2 learning such as *LinkYou* (<http://www.linkyou.info/>) and *Odnoklassniki* (<http://www.odnoklassniki.ru/>).

In addition, 33/45 are “expert users” of one of the communities, which means that they joined the community one year or more before. Instead, 7/45 had just joined the community at the moment of the interview (no more than three months) and were coded as “novice users”.

Of the subjects interviewed, 35/40 are “experienced language learners”, which means that they have already studied a language in a formal or non-formal context. Furthermore, 5/40 have been classified as professional language learners, which means that their professional experience revolves around language learning and/or teaching, translation, interpretation. In addition, the perceived proficiency level of the TL among the participants is mainly basic (15) and intermediate (18). With the aim to discover more about my interviewees’ language background, I inquired about their language experience abroad. It emerged that 21/45 had had or were having a long stay abroad in a country where the language spoken was different from their native language. For “long stay abroad” I meant at least a 3-month period. On the contrary, 24/45 had just travelled or had a short stay in another country. These data are useful to identify with more clarity the types of users inhabiting *Livemocha* and *Busuu*. It seems that the fact of having come into contact personally with people from other countries triggers their online social networking for language learning. In other words, the offline contact with speakers of the TL is an influencing factor that fosters the contact with online NSs. This is a way for them to seek opportunities to continue with the TL after the stay abroad. However, the majority of them (37/45) studies the language as a FL and 36 participants underlined that the contact with NSs that the platform provided motivates their language learning.

Another interesting data is that 23/45 participant are also taking a formal course and using the platform as a support and as a way to reinforce their language learning process. A quite relevant share of the population (14/45) explicitly mentioned that they consider the didactic material of these communities simply as a training support to their formal learning.

With regard to learners’ behaviours, the data revealed that learners use *Livemocha* and *Busuu* both as a learning and a social platform. It emerged that out of the 45 participants

13 mainly dedicated their time to the learning units of the platforms and did not interact with peers through the chat tool, 14 were mainly engaged to the chat tool and disregarded the learning units, and 18 combined the use of both chat tool and learning materials. Therefore, three profiles of learners were identified, according to the use they have of the resources and affordances of the platforms: profile 1 includes the learners oriented towards the didactic affordances of the platforms, profile 2 includes the learners oriented towards the social affordances of the platforms, and profile 3 includes the learners oriented towards both social and the didactic affordances. These profiles will be discussed more in detail in the following section (3.3.5). The participants belonging to profiles 1 and 3 felt that the didactic resources of the platforms could work as a training support to their language learning activities. In addition, several among them complained about the repetitive pattern drill style of the exercises, about the inaccuracy of the grammar content and about the boredom that the learning content is likely to generate.

The analysis also includes many other verbatims (direct quotations from online members), such as:

Yeah, it seems to me that Livemocha is a learning platform because I revise exercises of people who are from the other part of the world, I send my submissions I don't know where but someone corrects them, so...it's nice to have someone from Australia who is giving you some feedback and saying "this sentence is wrong" or "this exercise is not correct", or saying "good, you did everything" [...] I try to be very precise, I can spend 10-15 minutes to correct a couple of sentences [...] because in my opinion you can't do things badly. (P6)

P6's statement above suggests that learners value the possibility of receiving and providing feedback to unknown learners from all over the world. To this regard, 25 participants reported that one of the main reasons why they inhabited the platform was the contact with NSs. In addition, most participants indicated that, once they had found a language partner, they used to abandon the platform and opt for other ways to communicate, especially *Skype*.

Some concerns were observed from the data gathered from the interviews with participants about their online self-presentation and self-disclosure. Some participants emphasised the importance of displaying themselves through the new feature of posting pictures. This feature allowed them to contextualize and to introduce themselves and their

cultural roots. However, some of them expressed some concerns about other people's intrusion to their private lives.

Learners demonstrated responsible use of technology within the community by aiding other users and by respecting the tacit rules of the community. Moreover, they seemed to be highly aware of the discourse around cyberflirting and hoaxing, given that this was the most frequent comment mentioned. N. 25 participants found it uncomfortable that some people abused the community by harassing and cyberflirting with other users and 11 of them reported having been victims of hoaxing.

In relation to the awareness of reciprocity, 10 participants expressed some concerns about the choice of an adequate language partner and their comments indicate that they are highly aware of the idea of providing and offering assistance in equal shares and of the importance of "reciprocal sharing" (P8) conditions implied in the language partnership. Some participants stated that the interest in the partner decreased when the partner showed a low level of the TL or of English as lingua franca. In addition, some learners demonstrated great awareness of ineffective peer assistance when their partners did not correct their submissions properly and only to gain a reward.

The following extracts from quotations P7 and P44 show that some participants have the tendency to critically evaluate whether the other learner is a valuable language partner.

Yes, sure definitively [online] yeah once a guy called me from India. It was really really hard to talk to him because his level was very very basic and also he has some difficulties with the pronunciation, so when he told me something it was like "did you say this word?" but he said another word. I couldn't understand and actually this conversation...we didn't talk anymore because I thought that this is pointless. [...] for both of us, because he didn't understand me neither, we both couldn't understand each other and also he got a very very bad perception so we couldn't understand each other. (P7)

I'm not really sure but usually it's uneven. Either they want so much of my time for English and I have no time to speak their language or we speak in their language and they don't get much time in English. I think when you have two people who are very unbalanced like one person speaks the other person's language much better it's difficult to be language partners. (P44)

In the case of P7, it is necessary to notice that the learner might have encountered problems with the pronunciation of the Indian NS, which did not meet his expectations of standard English. In the case of P44, the learner underlines that the language partner should not have different levels of proficiency in the TL.

Taking into consideration learners' accounts, the interview data also show evidence of:

- *Metalinguistic awareness* (e.g. learners reflecting on their own learning process) in the case of 10 learners. One example regards one learner who combined the didactic resources of the platform with personal ones:

Well I think that my English should improve. I was focusing on the English of the everyday life about work, home, free time. Now I'm shifting to the English for journalists, I mean, I open the New York Times, I read an article and I understand the 20% of that article. (P36)

- *Metacognition* (e.g. revision checking, learners looked back at what they had learned in the previous units) in the case of 10 learners. One example is:

[...] so I practice it [the learning unit], I repeat it, I repeat it several times and I also write notes on my copybook (P 32)

- *Decision-making* (e.g. students articulated the goal-setting process) in the case of 7 learners. One example is:

No no no, we were there to just a definitive target, to make vocabulary and we had no target to correct our mistakes in English. (P39) [original quotation, not translated]

- *Negotiation of meaning* (e.g. problem solving, learners co-constructed knowledge by learning from each other) in the case of 6 learners. Some examples are:

"Try [to the language partner] to rephrase this [sentence] in another way or try to understand where the problem is because I don't understand". Or maybe he says: "I've understood just this part, not the other one. What did you mean?" (P28)

I have sometimes difficulty because some of the words in English are not familiar to them, they explain to me some words they don't know and I have to explain to them. P5

In the case of *Busuu*, students reported a mismatch between the level of the CEFR promised and the actual level of the lessons, which deceived students' expectations. In the case of *Livemocha*, where there is not a clear descriptor to assess the level of each class, students reported similar levels of dissatisfaction and underlined a similar mismatch, which confirms previous findings (Gruba & Clark, 2013).

In relation to the didactic materials, students revealed that the exercises were artificial and alienating, which is also in line with previous research (Chotel, 2012; Gruba & Clark, 2013) and one student (P10) reported: *“to do the same exercises over and over again is a bit exhaustive”*. This did not encourage learners to stay in the platforms with the objective to learn another language because the idea of starting again with the same exercises, the same method and the same images did not have appeal on learning: *“I have already done the same course but now I cannot just do it for Spanish anymore because I've just got tired of the same method”* (P10). This is an indicator of why the drop out from the platform might be inevitable. Instead, personalized real and authentic context for each language taking into consideration the cultural values that each language possesses has a lot of appeal on learning.

The second cycle of interviews focused on time factor and was submitted approximately 10 months after the first cycle. The second cycle confirmed what the online survey, the first cycle of interviews and previous studies had revealed and corroborated the results. As a reminder, 20 out of the 45 initial participants answered the second cycle of interviews. The participants who did not answer the second cycle were 25: 9 of them were more oriented towards the didactic resources, 8 of them were more oriented towards social networking and the left 8 were oriented towards both didactic resources and social networking.

It emerged that out of the 20 respondents 16 saw a decrease of their engagement to the platforms. Of these 16 participants, 4 were more oriented towards the didactic resources, 4 were more oriented towards social networking and 8 towards both didactic resources and social networking. The left 4 learners maintained that their engagement had kept constant but, in 1 case, it was very discontinuous. Of this 4 learners, 2 were oriented towards social networking (included the discontinuous learner) and 2 were oriented to-

wards social networking and didactic resources. The main reason adduced for the decrease of commitment is correlated to dissatisfaction for the learning materials (7 learners/20), reaching the extreme position of P24 who considered the “*platform as a good waste of time*”. According to P7, the motivation for being engaged to the platform decreased because the learning materials are too basic if learners’ level of the TL is advanced. Instead, if learners’ level of the TL is too basic, “*there’s no reason to talk to people*”. Other reasons mentioned were hoaxing and cyberflirting, lack of time, limitations due to a lot of learning content not available for free, preference for a formal course and F2F interactions, difficulty at creating a firm network of friends, and dissatisfaction with peer review feedback.

About learners’ perceptions on their language improvement over time, only 4 of the participants claimed having improved their language skills. These improvements mainly regarded vocabulary, pronunciation and reading skills and were mainly attributed to the creation of a network of contacts, which was a positive point stressed by the participants. In relation to the changes related to the platforms, it is necessary to underline that throughout the arch of time from the first to the second cycle of interview, *Livemocha* platform had just started a process of change in its design (See chapter 5.2.1 for a more detailed description). These changes in that arch of time mainly regarded its social networking features. It was no longer possible for learners to add any contact to their network of friends (except for friends of friends) and it was no longer possible to look for new contacts through the “search” function and according to filters such as gender, country, and language level. These changes were noticed and reported by 5 learners. In order to add friends in *Livemocha*, it is necessary to complete an exercise, ask the other users of the community for revision, and then send a friend request to the users who have reviewed the exercise. In addition, 4 learners oriented towards the social networking features of the platforms considered the change as a negative and demotivating aspect, because it made it more complicated for them to intertwine new relationships and increase their network. The change, instead, affected positively one learner more oriented towards the didactic affordances of the platforms, who reported being satisfied with the change since he considered *Livemocha* more as a multimedia resource than a SNS.

With regard to learners' network development over time, it emerged that 9 participants kept their original network of friends but in some cases it slightly reduced in the number. Only in 2 cases did the network develop. In all the cases, the participants tended to export their network to other web voice applications and/or popular general SNSs.

3.3.5. Discussion of the results

Considering the data gathered from the interviews, the common themes that emerged from the analysis are organized according to the research questions. In relation to the research questions, the interview results complete and strengthen the findings of the survey. At the same time, new themes arose.

The first main research question was:

1st Question. What kinds of opportunities for L2 use occur in online communities for L2 learning and what social and contextual factors affect and contribute to the construction of such opportunities and to learners' perceptions of L2 learning?

The sub-questions in relation to the area of *learners' behaviours (and performance)* were:

- a. How do different uses of online communities and different patterns of behaviour contribute to different opportunities for L2 use?
- b. How (if) do learners take advantage of the conditions of self-learning that the uncontrolled learning environment of online communities offer?

With regard to subquestion a, from the survey it emerged there are two main drivers orienting learners' activities within platform, that is, the contact with NSs and the use of didactic resources. This raised the hypothesis that these two drivers might orientate different types of learners with different types of learning behaviours. The results of the interviews indicated that there are different profiles of learners and different learning behaviours to which different uses of the platform and a different level of engagement and attitude correspond. Three learners' profiles representative of different types of learning could be distinguished:

Profile 1-THE COURSE TAKER. To this profile belongs a learner who takes the courses and practises the language through the didactic materials provided by the platform. His only form of interaction with other learners occurs when the system puts him into contact with the other learners for revisions and submissions. In most cases he does not perceive a social network and a place for “social networking” and he is not interested in it. This learner does not start a conversation but he contributes to the exchanges by sharing his knowledge of his mother tongue or of the languages he has a sound knowledge of. He explains grammar points and most of his explanations are clear and accurate, showing that he knows the topic well and can apply his previous knowledge. An example of this profile of learner is P.11. This is an extract from his interview:

Basically, I adopt some personal parameters in order to seek seriousness. In addition, according to me, if they don't chat so much they're usually more serious, but this is just a personal observation, ok? Because I don't chat so much...in my view, those who do it are probably using this social network to look for something else, not for studying for sure.[...] I have a friend, he has even married...when was it? The other day...and he met her on the site [...] exactly in Livemocha, they met there on the 6th of January and now they are married! Lucky them! (P11)

Profile 2-THE SOCIAL NETWORKER. This learner profile has a social networking tendency for friendship and learning. His approach is very different from profile 1, the course taker, in the sense that this type of learner seems not to be interested in grammar and in the didactic content. Without having completed the didactic units and the activities provided by the platform, he has initiated several discussions with several different peers, often independently of the country his peers are from and of the languages they are speaking. This learner also makes an extensive use of English as a “lingua franca”. Interviewees P35 and P38 are good examples for this category. P35 is stressing the idea that he is not interested in the didactic aspect of the platform as a repository of grammar content that he can access anywhere else:

I am not learning grammar there because I have my own library full of language books. I only chat in English and Spanish in order to help my language learning cyberfriends (P35)

Similarly, in the case of P38, his interactions are mainly focused on sharing his enthusiasm about different cultures and countries, independently of the TL, and making connections with his own culture:

I'm learning there because I think it's funny and I went to do funny things, to know people from other cultures, people from everywhere and I only knew to talk a universal language there, which is English now. It was Latin in the past. But I think they should have another way to talk to people, many people from the scientific bases. People there are from many different areas and languages, others are from Persia. I hardly have found someone from my field, mathematics [...] yeah mathematic, geometry, apparently there are some people from Italy that are doing some talks and I think that later...not now. (P38)

Profile 3-THE SOCIAL COURSE TAKER. This learner combines the didactic activities of the platform with social networking with NSs and is a mix between the course taker and the social networker. After having exhausted all the didactic possibilities offered by the platforms he turns into profile 2, the social networker. An example for this category is P10:

You have all types of people in here. Sometimes I met with people that are French speakers and they speak French worse than I do because I have this concern about grammar, I have the school structure to learn. And when you are online you are not so much worried about the grammar and stuff, so there are a lot of different profiles in here, but once you find nice people that have this ability of the language, this understanding of their own language, their reviews were always great (...). Now I need for work. I started Italian in Livemocha. I finished all the program, all the Italian program, just for fun, but I have to drop very soon because I started French and Spanish languages and English and I need to work. (...) I have had the great opportunity to meet some of the friends I've made in Livemocha. I have like 3 or 4 friends that I've met offline. Because of Livemocha now we are great friends and I have at least some more 5, which are only online but great friends. And I have like 20 partners, 20 colleagues just to exchange languages. They are not close friends as the other ones because we really developed this. I've been in Livemocha about 4 years now (...) to chat about nice things or serious things doesn't matter because you can improve language from all level of things, more formal conversations or just silly talks about music and TV or the weather (P10)

The interviews also showed that the interactional opportunities for the course takers (profile 1) are more restricted, since they would be simply limited to the peer-to-peer

review of the online exercise submissions. On the contrary, the social networkers (profile 2) are attracted by the social networking features of the community and willing to create a network of language partners through the chat. In addition, the social course takers (profile 3) often turn into social networkers (profile 2). In fact, after having exhausted and having experienced all the didactic affordances of the online communities they start inhabiting it just for social networking purposes. The learners who have more opportunities to practice the TL are those belonging to profile 2 (the social networker) and 3 (the social course taker) because, rather than being engaged with repetitive pattern-drills, they are involved in interactional conversations. However, when the social course takers are social networking and interacting with other learners through the chat tool, these conversations do not concern the didactic units and the exercises taken on the platform. In other words, the social course takers carry out social networking and course taking as two separate activities in the platforms. In the data analysed there is anecdotal evidence of these two activities working in conjunction.

In relation to subquestion b, by the means of the survey, it was not possible to find an exhaustive answer. The interview phase showed that learners are aware of the uncontrolled environment of social networks but they do not perceive it as “uncontrolled”, since the self-paced lessons and the organization of the learning material tends to resemble the type of learning occurring in formal environments. They appreciate this aspect. In addition, some of them complained about the absence of a teacher and the guaranties of accuracy and reliability deriving from a formal course. However, it emerged that many among them do not usually expect from the platform more than it can actually offer. Therefore, they seem to respond to this condition by managing their own learning in such a way to use the platform as a support and as a training tool. At the same time, many of them recognised that the platform represents a valuable opportunity to practise the language with NSs, which in a formal course is not always a common practice.

The sub-questions in relation to the area of *peer assistance* were:

- a. Is there any evidence of effective peer assistance receiving and provision? Are learners aware of the reciprocity or lack of it between themselves and their peers?

- b. What kind of assistance do learners provide to each other? What strategies do learners enact to foster their peers' improvement in the L2 during the dyadic interactions?

With regard to subquestion a, the results of the interview phase showed that learners are highly aware of the reciprocity or lack of it, especially during the exercises submission for peer review. The findings, in particular, highlight the importance issues of learners' management of their relationship with language peers and the awareness of the inadequate feedback some learners provide to the community. The picture that emerges is that learners possess the skills and knowledge necessary to train their language skills in the community but not always to provide the adequate feedback. Learners demonstrated to be aware of the value of their contributions and expect it to be recognised by the community. In addition, they also expect being treated in the same way when peers offer their assistance; this suggests that the principle of reciprocity is one of their main triggering factors to their engagement to the community. With regard to assistance effectiveness, contradictory results emerged. On the one hand, learners found that the revisions made by NSs were a remarkable triggering factor for their learning process. On the other hand, as already outlined, some learners were totally dissatisfied with the review system because it was carried out by non experts and because it was inaccurate. In addition, the peer feedback given by the other users is sometimes interpreted as teaching by learners. This contradiction might be due in part to the terminology adopted by *Livemocha* when the study was carried out. The platform distinguished between teachers and learners to indicate respectively experts or novices of a given language. The result was that, in some cases, learners' expectations about their peers were high.

With regard to subquestion b different forms of peer assistance were found and codified as elicited by learners' accounts. These were:

- *Grammar explanation* (codified for 17 learners). Examples from their accounts are:

I had the opportunity to have like 5 or 10 people, they really helped me in all, with speaking, "the grammar doesn't sound so good", "we don't usually say this like that", "it's better if you write it in this way" so...for grammar and writing it's a little bit more complicated but even people that don't have much of understanding in the language will help you out with pronun-

ciation and I think is the highlight of Livemocha. Because once you are speaking with natives they can help you out with the way things are, how they say stuff. It's always nice. P10

He tried to teach me irregular verbs in English. P33

In the case of one learner, this form of assistance was embedded and strategic as it was probably activated not to hurt the partner's sensitivity:

I mean, I don't usually say: "Pay attention, you have to write it with double t". But then I try to write again the word that they have misspelled. You know, I do it in this way. P17

- *Word explanation/search* (codified for 19 learners). Examples from their accounts are:

If I ask, she writes the words down. If I don't know a word because I don't have time to look it up or to use a dictionary, I ask to write for me the words and I can actually look it up afterwards. No no, I would actually say I'm satisfied. P31

Since I have been learning English for short time, sometimes I make it fast and I say the word directly in Spanish. He translates the word and he tells me how it should be in English. P43

With time and after many dialogues I learn; when there's a new word, I write his suggestion [from a language partner] on a sheet of piece of paper and then I go and check the meaning. P25

I remember that the last time he [a language partner] wanted me to translate into Spanish some words dealing with bathroom accessories. It was for his girlfriend's job. I did that for him, he was happy and thanked me a lot. P3

- *Sharing intercultural pragmatics* (codified for 14 learners). An example comes from the accounts of a Brazilian learner interacting with another learner from a Muslim country :

It was a little misunderstanding but mostly about cultural issues than... Oh yes! I was saying goodbye to her and I sent her a kiss and said: "Ok. Kiss you. Bye bye". And she said: "No, you cannot kiss women in my country". It was very interesting because she said: "no, it's not

possible. Don't do that again or I will block you". It's fine because in my culture it's very natural. She said: "no, men in my culture kiss each other but men cannot come up kissing women". It was something like this. P10

- *Emotional support beyond learning trajectory* for two learners, but one of them seemed not to appreciate it:

[...] I try to avoid this kind of...people dump all their problems on you, don't they? They use the chat as if it was the psychoanalyst's coach. They tell you about all their lives...I have this Dutch friend who lives in Argentina...it seems that everything happens to him, all these married women with thousands of problems, who...I don't know...and I said: "things happen only to you?". P23

- *Sharing material* (codified for 3 learners). Examples from their accounts are:

Many times he [a language partner] sends me some links or, in turn, if I find an interesting article I send it to him. This is the most common form of interaction. Or we send to each other suggestions on how to learn a language, things like that. P24

I got lots amounts of nice tips from movies and songs and websites. P10

- *Technical assistance* (codified for 1 learner) regarding the use of the webcam on Skype:

Then I bought a small webcam because this Indian showed me how to use it: "You see? You can use it in such a way, you go on Skype, etc." P16

The second main question was:

2nd Question. What are the affordances and constraints of online communities for L2 learning in relation to their effectiveness for long-term learning outcomes?

In relation to the second main question about learners' level of engagement to the platform over time, the subquestions were:

- a. Is learners' engagement with online communities maintained, increased or decreased over time?

- b. What is the relationship between the maintenance, decrease or increase of learners' engagement with the platform over time and (1) the social affordances, (2) the didactic affordances and (3) any other practice or environmental issue?

With reference to subquestion a, the interview phase and the second cycle of interviews in particular, revealed that learners' engagement tends to decrease. The second cycle of interviews was carried out in a time span of 10 months from the first cycle of interviews. The results obtained proved that learners' engagement tend to decrease over time (see 3.3.4).

In relation to subquestion b, through the survey it emerged that there is a wide amount of inactive users. In addition, from learners' answers to the survey, it emerged that there is a correlation between their engagement and the learning activities provided by the platforms. The interview phase (especially the second cycle) showed that the members who are most active on the platforms are the newcomers, because triggered by the novelty factor related to the discovery of the platforms' affordances, and older members who enhanced their sense of belonging to the online communities and "kept their loyalty" to them. From these data, it was possible to deduce that learners from the three profiles tend to abandon the platforms and to reduce their level of commitment. But, learner profile 1, the course taker, who is more oriented towards the didactic affordances, is the most affected by this disengagement. Thus, he is the most likely to abandon it because he is not satisfied with the didactic materials (repetitive and automatic, object of many critics and complaints) and because he does not have a network of contacts to rely on. To this regard, it would be necessary to point out that the reason why these lessons are not interactive and constitute a frustration factor is that they do not work perfectly in synergy with the social aspect of the system. In other words, while learners take exercises and practice their L2, they do not have the possibility to negotiate meaning with other learners taking the same exercise in that same moment and to assist each other in the TL. It is the system that replies and solves their doubts through an automatic green (correct) or red (wrong) response.

The results of the survey showed that there is a key-factor stimulating learners' activities and determining learners' engagement to the platforms, that is, prompt and adequate

peer assistance provision and offering. It emerged that learners are aware of the importance of reciprocity between peers but seem not to be adequately trained and competent to provide correct assistance. Another problem that emerged regards the fact that it is difficult for learners to create bonds and to intertwine contacts with their language partners because many of them are not immediately available in the chat. This is due to the fact that they are inactive users, that they use the platform in a different way or that they distrust the interactional aspect of the online communities.

The interview phase corroborated these results and revealed that in the case of learner profiles 2, the social networker, and 3, the social course taker, which are the profiles involved in the interactions, the communities become a meeting place where to intertwine social contacts. Results show a prevalence of “networking”, which emphasizes relationship initiation, often between strangers. Once a tandem partnership is established, it usually develops outside of the community and through other social tools such as *Skype* and *MSN*. In other words, the communities after a while start being considered as a source where to draw online language partners. The results of the analysis in general confirm the presence of the *zapping* interactional situation among learners identified by Chotel (2012). Results also show that it is very difficult for learners to strengthen their bonds and their “weak ties”. This situation is due to the fact that many of these potential interlocutors are not online and this makes it difficult to find adequate language partners. At the same time, this is one of the main source of problems and contradictions of these communities and it is responsible for the high level of learners’ drop-out. In relation to the tools available for the interaction (the textual chat, the video-chat and the forum), results revealed that learners did not consider the asynchronous exchanges of the forum as dynamic and disregarded the synchronic features of the webcam, which is in agreement with Chotel (2012)’s study. However, the main reason for disregarding the webcam tool rather than being the untrustworthiness of chatting with strangers (Chotel, 2012), was that they were not even aware of the presence of this tool in the communities. The second reason was the slowness as a technical constraint of this tool. Therefore, in line with Chotel (2012) learners’ preferred modality for communication was the quasi-synchronic feature of the textual chat and the reason for this choice is the possibility to have an immediate feedback from the NSs, after having found a NS available online.

Therefore, this phase of this exploratory study proves that other contextual factors affecting learners' gradual disengagement over time are related to correct feedback provision during the interaction. This raises a certain number of new, practical and theoretical questions such as: how do interactions among these weak ties develop? Does social networking turn into a tandem language partnership? In what cases? What types of exchanges do learners have once they have found a language partner or created their language partner network? In this sense, this stage of the study points to the need to identify and provide concrete evidence of some specific forms of peer assistance mentioned by the interviewees such as mistake correction, metalinguistic talk, word provision, word explanation/search, and so forth.

An analysis of the utterances of the learners interviewed would illustrate how learners in their exchange partnership collaboratively co-construct opportunities to interact with their partners in the L2 in an authentic context. To this regard, in order to respond the remaining subquestions, the corpus data analysed in the following chapter focuses on the issue of peer assistance during the language partnership more in depth and provides examples of failure of peer assistance provision and examples of successful peer assistance provision.

To conclude, the interview phase was a precious source of information to identify the characteristics of the learners inhabiting online communities for L2 learning and to elicit some information about the different forms of mutual aid enacted. This phase also revealed learners' perceptions about online communities for L2 learning and the important role played by learning autonomy for successful learning experience.

3.4. Conclusion

This chapter presented the context, the methods and four phases of the empirical analysis. After contextualizing the scenario of the investigation and describing the online communities selected for the study (phase 1), the chapter reported the ethnographic observations deriving from living in the communities as a participant learner (phase 2). Then, the chapter explained the method of the online survey and the data set, it analysed the data obtained and interpreted them (phase 3). The results of this stage opened up the way to the following stage revolving around the online interviews (phase 3). After illustrating the method adopted, the subjects involved and the procedures for data collection,

the methods to encode and analyse data sets were presented and the deriving results were interpreted and discussed. This last phase was very insightful and allowed me to reply to key aspects of the research questions. It was also crucial because it led to the identification of the case studies among the interviewees and to the start of the last two following phases, phase V (*case studies*) and phase VI (*recall interviews*), which will deserve a separate chapter, the following (Chapter 4).

[CHAPTER 4]

Results (phases V-VI)

“Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own.”

–Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

This chapter tackles phases 5 and 6 of the study, the collection of the online interactions and the recall interviews of the case studies. The chapter describes three case studies, William, Nastya and Jelena²¹, learners of different background and with a different experience of the online communities. For each one of them meaningful interactional episodes showing successful examples of peer assistance but also repair failure are presented. The chapter also shows how the results presented are corroborated by means of the recall interviews, which offered the possibility to analyse learners’ perceptions after the interactional episodes. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the role played by spontaneous conversations in a SCMC environment on the bases of the results obtained.

4.1. The collection of the online interactions and the recall interviews

As the previous chapter has illustrated, the qualitative analysis deriving from the semi-structured interviews has elicited relevant information regarding online learners’ interactional attitudes and their patterns of behaviour within the online communities *Livemocha* and *Busuu*, as well as their exploration of other online environments to find language partners and their tendency to transfer one’s network of online language partners to other platforms and voice applications like *Skype*. It also revealed out learners’ perceptions about their online language experience in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* and that these environments frequently are not perceived as online communities where to intertwine relationships, but rather as a repository of didactic material. It emerged that from learners’ different visions of these platforms derive different expectations, different behaviours

²¹ Fictitious names in place of real names are used throughout the whole analysis to protect learners’ anonymity. In particular, I decided to assign to each case study a common name used in the country s/he belongs to. The same was done with any other name, place, reference related to the case studies.

and usage, different levels of commitment, and different profiles of learners. It also emerged that those learners who possess a more active social networking attitude, that is, the tendency to look for eventual language partners, to intertwine relationships with them and then to strengthen these ties over time, are the most likely to report a successful learning experience.

The previous phases of the study (phases I-IV) were useful to identify general tendencies and main patterns and to examine learners' language learning and social behaviours within these language contexts. Nevertheless, given that the main aim of this study is to understand further the ability of online learners to create and provide opportunities for the use of the TL within their online network of language partners (and I have shown that *Busuu* and *Livemocha* play a remarkable role in the creation of these personal networks because they function as "meeting places"), after having analysed learners' general behaviour in these social contexts, it is essential to consider their online behaviour more in detail on the basis of the information obtained during the phase of the interaction interviews.

This chapter deals with phases V (*online interactions*) and VI (*recall interviews*) and is a direct outcome of the *interview* phase (phase IV) because it further analyses some important issues and questions that in part have already been tackled and answered during the interview phase through learners' accounts. These issues revolve around how learners orient to opportunities of L2 use, if they are aware and able to take the most advantage out of the conditions of total freedom deriving from their surrounding environment, if there is evidence of effective peer assistance receiving and provision, what forms of assistance it is possible to detect, if learners are aware of the reciprocity or lack of it between themselves and their peers, what social and contextual factors affect learners' language choice and its maintenance and how different uses of the online social network and different patterns of behaviour contribute to different opportunities for L2 use to occur in their interactions.

In order to attain these goals, I analysed learners' spontaneous discourse and their spontaneous online interactions occurring with the online network they themselves created. The analysis of learners' online interactions has been possible through the collection and the analysis of samples of interactive discourse provided by the learners themselves.

Therefore, I decided to follow the approach of the case study in the SLA field (Duff, 2008; Kurata, 2011; Merriam, 1998; Nunan, 1992) and to deal with multiple cases studies in order to outline a clearer picture of each one of the learners selected. The chapter, in particular, will carry out a multiple case study analysis adopting an instrumental case study. This research method is used in order to draw more general conclusions that apply beyond each specific case (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Therefore, each particular case will be useful as a means to understand more general patterns considering learners' in a holistic whole.

Moreover, given that the research adopts a methodological triangulation (see Chapter 2, section 2.4.1), this phase is necessary to enhance the internal validity of the study and to allow the cross-checking of the data collected during the nethnographic method that utilized the survey and the interview techniques. The adoption of another type of qualitative technique, the collection of interactional data, has the purpose of corroborating the information obtained in the previous phases and to advance our understanding of learners' construction of opportunities.

4.1.1. Introduction to the case studies

The participants of this study were recruited among the 45 interviewees who answered the first cycle of semi-structured interviews and showed more interest in the project by submitting their online interactions in an arch of time of 10 months (December 2011-September 2012). Out of 45 learners a number of 3 case studies were selected through purposeful sampling, mainly on the basis of the availability of their interactional data. These 3 learners were users of at least one language community between *Livemocha* and *Busuu* and made use of other platforms as well for finding language partners such as *Languageexchange*. They were from different countries, driven by different learning goals, studying different TL and with different levels of TL proficiency. Their way to inhabit the language communities differed from each other as they belonged to different profiles of users, as I explain here:

Profile 1- The course taker

The learners belonging to this profile are focused on the didactic affordances of the platforms and not on the social ones (chat tool). Therefore, there are no interactional data for this profile of learners. For this reasons, these learners are not treated as case studies.

Profile 2- *The social networker*

Case study 1 (William) and Case study 2 (Nastya) belong to this profile.

Profile 3- *The social course taker*

Case study 3 (Jelena) belongs to this profile.

This selection occurred according to the availability of the data that I had, to learners' level of motivation and commitment to the project, but also on the basis of the detailed accounts about themselves they provided me with during the interview phase. In fact, the qualitative analysis of their accounts revealed a good level of metalinguistic reflection, self-organization, self awareness about their language behaviour and digital critical literacy, which are all categories defining learner autonomy in my study. Table 4.1 provides a general overview of each case study:

Table 4.1 Data for each learner

| Learners' details | Case 1 William | Case 2 Nastya | Case 3 Jelena |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|
| Interaction Data | 11 recordings <i>Skype</i> conversations | 8 extracts from online chat in <i>Skype</i> | 5 extracts from online chat in <i>Skype</i> , 1 in <i>MSN</i> and 1 in <i>Facebook</i> |
| Diary entries | 2-14 April 2011 | No | No |
| Age | 50 | 21 | 24 |
| Gender | M | F | F |
| Nationality | English | Russian | Serbian |
| Native Language | English | Russian | Serbian |
| Target Language | Spanish as FL | English as FL | Spanish and Italian as FL |
| Language Proficiency | Studying for DELE B2 | C1 | B2 |
| User | <i>Livemocha</i> | <i>Livemocha</i> (mainly) <i>Busuu</i> | <i>Busuu</i> (mainly) <i>Livemocha</i> |

The table above shows some information about these 3 learners, the time period of the data collection and the different types of data (online interactions and diary entries) they provided me with over time.

A detailed description for each participant will be given later in this chapter when every participant will be treated as a single case study, taking into account their learning history, their motivations for learning, their exposure to the TL, their online network of language partners and their learning behaviour in relation to the online community where they were recruited based on the interview data.

Some more words should be spent on the criteria according to which the online interactional material is organized in this chapter. The online interactional material is neither organized according to typology of assistance seeking and provision nor according to typology of interaction (synchronous/asynchronous; textual/audio). Even though these aspects are considered relevant for the analysis process, the interactional material is organized according to learners' profiles. The reason for this choice is the sociocultural framework and the interpretative methodology behind this study. As also explained in chapter 2.4.2, I am employing the ethnographic approach throughout the whole investigation process and also within the context of every single case study. The ethnographic lens, sociocultural theory and AT model favoured a deeper understanding of learners' online discourse in relation to their identity and to their learning experience as a whole, considering each learner as a complex system in relation to the rest of the community.

4.1.2. Collection and transcription of online interaction data

With the purpose of doing a micro-discourse analysis of learners' electronic discourse in their dyadic interactions with their peers in order to examine online learners' construction of opportunities for L2 use, I collected a wide and variegated number of learners' online interactions. As displayed in Table 4.1, these data include online chat scripts and audio recordings produced by learners in occasion of their online natural conversations in pairs.

During the interview phase, I requested all the 45 interviewees to submit online data to analyse, asking them for permission to use this material through a specific written informed consent. I also requested them to ask their language exchange partners for permission before giving me any sort of data. Moreover, I asked learners whether they had already saved any form of interaction with their language partners. I instructed them how to proceed and suggested informing their language partners about the investigation possibly at the end of the interaction so that the electronic discourse could be as natural and

spontaneous as possible. Obviously, in the case of multiple interactions with the same partner, this was not possible. I explained to my participants that the topic of their conversation was free and that I would hide any sort of personal reference to their personal lives. I also specified that the focus of my study was the presence (or not) of peer assistance during their talks and what forms this assistance could take.

The initial corpus data (taking into consideration the 3 volunteers) consists of a total of 26 samples of interactional data, 11 of which are audio-recordings. In the case of the audio recordings, I dispose of several audio files regarding learners' oral conversations occurred in *Skype*. These conversations have been recorded through one of the several *Skype* call recording programs suggested by me to the case studies during the interviews of the first cycle. The most used recording program has been *Prettypay* (<http://www.prettypay.net/>).

After that the case studies submitted their recordings, I proceeded in this way. I firstly listened to all the tapes to identify the most salient moments of their conversations, those which revolved around concrete example of peer assistance, as they had been previously codified during the analysis of the interviews (see Chapter 3, section 3.3.3 and 3.3.4.), such as word explanation/search, grammar explanation, sharing material, suggestions, technical assistance, metalinguistic assistance, sharing intercultural pragmatics, emotional support beyond learning trajectory. Then I analysed the interactions following the different levels of corrective feedback and the sociocultural and interactionist taxonomy explained in chapter 2, section 2.3.1. For the interactions occurred through the textual chat I operated in the same way but without any transcriptions and leaving the text as it is without any editing.

After having identified the sections worthy of analysis in the recordings, I transcribed these segments through the help of an Excel sheet according to CA conventions for SLA (Markee, 2000) with some simplifications and modifications from Jefferson (2004). These transcription conventions are listed in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Transcription conventions

| | | |
|----|-------|--|
| A: | [word | Square brackets denote the start of overlapping, simultaneous talk. I also use "]" bracket to show where the overlap stops |
| B: | [word | |

| | | |
|--|-------------|--|
| | (.) | Pause less than one second |
| | (1) (2) (3) | Pauses of one, two or three seconds respectively |
| | ? | Rising intonation |
| | ! | Strong intonation |
| | , | Low-rising intonation suggesting continuation |
| | . | Falling (final) intonation |
| | : | Lengthening of the preceding sound |
| | >word< | Faster speech |
| | <word> | Slower speech |
| | (hhh) | Laughter |
| | [/ə/] | Phonetic transcription |
| | (...) | Incomprehensible utterance |
| | [coughs] | Researcher's comments about actions, non-verbal actions and situations |

To show mispronounced words from the audio-recordings, phonetic symbols were employed. Translations from other languages into English are provided in italics. The English translations from other languages try to convey the original meaning as closely as possible although they lose the spelling and linguistic mistakes of the original text.

Utterances pronounced in Russian are written in Cyrillic alphabet and then transliterated into Latin characters according to the British standard. The same is done with sentences spelled in Cyrillic in the textual chat.

In the case of textual conversations, the phrases are left as they are and spelling, typographical and linguistic inaccuracies are intentionally left in order to allow a better analysis of the participant's discourse.

4.1.3. Recall interviews for the case studies

As already explained, this study is longitudinal, which means that it tends to find out variations over time in learners' behaviour toward their online language experience. The type of longitudinal study that applies the specific case of this research is called "panel study" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008:374), which means that the same subjects have been studied at successive points over time. In fact, some participants of this study have been interviewed twice, the first time in occasion of the first cycle of interviews conducted from December 2011 to March 2012 and the second time in occasion of the second cycle of interviews in the period October-November 2012 (see chapter 3, section 3.3.1).

Among the interviewees of the 1st and the 2nd cycle, there were the 3 case studies of this investigation. In the arch of time between the 1st and the 2nd cycle, they submitted their online interactions and became the 3 case studies (phase V). Then, in occasion of the second cycle of interviews, a special type of interview was prepared for them, the stimulated recall interview (phase VI, *recall interviews*). Stimulated recall interviews were the technique employed to face this second cycle of interviews addressed specifically to the case studies selected for the investigation. These interviews had the aim to examine learners' level of commitment to online language learner, their perceptions about their language progress, their level of engagement in the TL and the development of their language friends over time. These interviews are a precious source of information to draw a more detailed profile for each case study, to explain several speech happenings occurring during their online interactions and to achieve a better understanding of learners' awareness and learners' feelings and intentions when offering or providing assistance. Therefore, this chapter relies on these accounts as a support to explain the case studies' interactional events with their language partners.

Stimulated recall interviews are a retrospective method involving the use of a stimulus (Borg, 2006), which in the case of this study was the transcriptions of both the written and oral interactions of the interviewee, so that the participants could recall more easily their performed behaviours during the conversational episode about which the researcher want to elicit verbal commentaries. After showing or reciting the transcription during this second cycle of interviews, the case studies commented about their feelings and their thoughts during the interactional episode described. The interview script consisted of very specific predetermined questions focused on key-episodes that the researcher wanted to highlight, such as incidents, problems, misunderstanding or any form of peer assistance occurred during the speech event. The researcher herself selected these key-episodes as fragments extracted from a whole conversation or textual chat.

The interview script consisted of three sections (see Appendix G). The first section had general questions related to learners' level of commitment to *Livemocha* and *Busuu* platforms over time, to the changes occurred in their network of language partners and to the language skills (if any) they perceived they improved in this arch of time. The questions of this first part of the interview were also sent as a questionnaire by email and through *Skype* to the whole group of the 45 interviewees. In the second section, I asked

more personalized questions on the basis of the information I elicited during the first cycle of interview. The questions were mainly addressed to a better understanding of the strength of the relationships intertwined with the other language partners mentioned in the previous interview and to whether learners had been able to keep these contacts and with what purpose. In this section, I also tried to investigate their language progress more in depth throughout these months span. Finally, for the third section I employed the interaction interview format. In this phase of the interview, I asked each learner to recall a specific speech event selected by me among the online interactional data provided and asked him/her to explain what occurred in that specific situation. This was useful to shed more light on the nature of language selection, on a failed or successful repair sequence, on whether language noticing occurred, on whether they were able to recall the correction at a time distance, and on their intention to maintain learning and social trajectories. It was also useful to elicit more information on learners' emotions and feelings, on the construction of their identity as proficient learners during the online interaction, on their expectations towards their language partners, on the awareness of reciprocity during these dyadic conversations and finally on their level of satisfaction with the interactional event.

The interviews to the 3 case studies were conducted through *Skype* audio/video calls according to learners' preferences and availability. Each interview was recorded through a *Skype* recorder and transcribed immediately or a few days later. These interviews occurred mainly in English and Spanish but it is worthy to underline that in the occasion of the second cycle of interviews the 3 case studies decided to be fully or partially interviewed in their TL, which might entail that throughout this time span their confidence in using the TL increased.

This chapter will combine the interactional data submitted by the case studies, diary entries (the ones available are from case study 1) and observations deriving from online data extracted from the platform, with the data collection deriving from this second cycle of interviews and will analyse each learner as a separate case, tackling the last two phases of this study.

4.2. Case 1 - Learner William

William was a social networker (profile 2). He was an expert user of *Livemocha* and his behaviour within the online network was characterized by the tendency to networking and intertwining new relationships in the communities, which led him to build up and organize an extensive network of friends. He not only drew from *Livemocha* community, but also on other popular communities designed for seeking language partners to communicate, such as *Languageexchange.com*. In his opinion, such learning environments rather than being so much focused on vocabulary building and testing should be kept strictly to learning through the interaction with NSs. William did not make a wide and extensive use of the didactic material provided by the platform and limited to share his “native knowledge of English with people” by doing revisions for the other learners. At the moment of the first interview (December 2011) he was drawing on *Livemocha* as a meeting place to find language partners but for the conversations he had opted for *Skype* or *Microsoft Instant Messenger (MSN)* (<http://www.msn.com/>) because, in his own words “*Skype has probably one of the better connections you can get. Livemocha is good for meeting people but it's not always such a good line*”. In fact, all the data that William submitted to me consists of audio recordings of conversations occurred in *Skype*. The following sections will outline a more detailed picture of him.

4.2.1. Linguistic background

William is 50 years old, he is British and he is highly motivated in learning Spanish because of his Spanish origins on his father's side. He has been studying Spanish for long time and he is highly aware of the possibilities open to nowadays' learners in comparison to the past: “people don't realise what it is like in 1990 when I started learning Spanish. And now you can have someone from Spain and you start talking to a native speaker”.

William is studying Spanish as a FL in a non-Spanish context. During the interview, he highlighted the difficulties that he experienced during his short stays in Spain. He visited his Spanish relatives in Spain but these stays were not very successful because he did not have the possibility to learn the language better. For this reason, he values the contact with NSs in *Skype* as the best way to learn, rather than studying the language as an L2 in the country. He also reported that he liked reading books written in Spanish everyday but that he felt he was improving especially his listening and speaking skills through his everyday practice in *Skype*.

William is keen to pursue social contact with NSs of Spanish and has a wide number of contacts in *Livemocha* (around 2000 people), but almost all of them are weak ties. Drawing on some of these contacts and on others intertwined in *languageexchange.com*, William was able to create a small network in *Skype* for language practice. By network, as I explained previously (see chapter 1, section 1.2), I mean “the informal social relationships contracted by an individual” (Milroy, 1987: 178).

During the interview, which occurred through a Skype video call, William showed me behind his desk a busy calendar where he scheduled his online meetings with a network of a number of 64 online contacts. He claimed that every night he has conversations with one or two people, each one for each day of the week. The people he interacted with more frequently at the time of the first interview were 5, some of whom he had the occasion to meet in person. For example, he commented that he has a friend, Aniko, a Hungarian teacher of Spanish he met in *Livemocha*, and that he spent three days with her in Hungary in summer.

At the moment of the first interview, William was studying to pass the higher intermediate level (B2) of the forthcoming test DELE (Diplomas of Spanish as a Foreign Language) and he was studying hard to achieve the certification. When asked about the language partner with whom he perceived to have learned the most, he mentioned Marisol, a Spanish teacher of English who, similarly to him, was studying for the higher intermediate level (B2) of English. Both of them were studying to achieve the same level of their respective TL and were talking regularly. During the first interview and before taking the Spanish exam William’s self-image and identity as a proficient learner were higher. He explained that his Spanish was higher than Marisol’s English and that he used to switch to Spanish to explain to her the meaning of an unclear word. However, when I interviewed him the second time after 10 months (October, 2012) he was slightly disappointed because he had failed the level B2 of the exam DELE the previous May for the writing part and he was studying harder to pass the exam, while her language partner had passed the level B2 of English.

4.2.2. Language use patterns and opportunities

As the following excerpts will show, William is an active creator of opportunities to use the L2 and, as he reported in his diary entries and in the interviews, he clearly defined his social role in the conversation. Following Engeström model's (1999) of AT, it is possible to say that William agreed on a division of labour with his language partners, which means that one learner is in charge of being the expert while the other one is the novice. As a consequence, in many of these interactions exposed corrections are more frequent, William and his language partners expect and are prepared for corrections and for exposing their identity as proficient learners of their respective TL to repair. The definition of roles also implies the agreement on the language selection. William, whose conversations occur entirely through *Skype* audio and video calls, pointed out that he and his partners usually arranged on speaking half an hour in English and half an hour in Spanish. The following excerpt, illustrates a sequence of an incorrect utterance produced by the learner (in this case William) followed by an immediate recast made by Pilar, NS of Spanish, one of the main hubs of William's network.

Excerpt 1.1

- 26 W: Sí, sí, todos los años pero el año pasado hacía nieve.
Yes, yes, every year but last year it snowed.
- 27 P: El año pasado nevó, nevaba.
Last year "nevó", "nevaba".
- 28 W: Nevaba, sí, sí.
"Nevaba", yeah yeah
- 29 P: Y no pudisteis salir a la playa imagino...nevando...

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback of this excerpt. In this case all the instances are around the same correction.

Table 4.3 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.1

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|--|----------------------------------|
| Lexical | Hacía nieve/nevaba (turns 26-27) |
| Other-correction (by Pilar as a NS) | Turns 26-27 |
| Exposed correction | Turns 26-27 |

The learner, William, uses a non-target form (26) and later receives an unsolicited corrected feedback from Pilar, the NS, who recasts the target form. (27) The learner visibly

notices the problem and accepts it. (28) As it is possible to notice, the correct utterance produced by Pilar does not hurt William’s sensitivity and is fully accepted by him because of a previously clear and aware definition of their roles and task in the conversation. In this case, Pilar fulfils her obligation to provide assistance to his peer through the replacement of “hacía nieve” with the target-like forms “nevó” and “nevaba”. It is possible that the origin of the mistake is due to the correct Spanish form “hacer sol” (it is sunny). William probably knew this expression in Spanish and extended it in an incorrect way. Moreover, Pilar’s correction does not alter the flowing of the conversation and the social trajectory is maintained (29). Following AT model, it is possible to say that both learner and NS demonstrate to share and maintain two competing goals that in this sequence proceed in parallel, language practising and interpersonal engagement.

The following excerpt presents a very similar situation with the only difference that this time William takes the roles of the expert and Pilar the role of the novice because it is Pilar’s turn to practice the TL, as agreed.

Excerpt 1.2

- 92 P: I never cooked turkey before and some American friends give me several recipes [pronounced as /re'saips/]
- 93 W: recipes [pronounced as /'resəpiz/]
- 94 P: recipes [pronounced as /'resəpiz/] Ooooooh.
- 95 W: I had to say that (*bbb*)
- 96 P: Oooooh this word it's terrible. Recipes. And I'm going to make a mix-max of all these...
- 97 W: [A mix-max (*bbb*)
- 98 P: [and I'm trying to do the turkey my way and well I don't know if finally we must to call for a pizza...
- 99 W: (*bbb*)

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback of this excerpt. In this case all the instances revolve around the same correction as well:

Table 4.4 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.2

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|--|--|
| Phonological | /re'saips/ vs /'resəpiz/ (turns 92-93) |
| Other-correction (by William as a NS) | Turns 92-93 |
| Exposed correction | Turns 92-93 |

In this context, the learner, Pilar uses a non-target form (92) and later receives an unsolicited corrected feedback from the NS, William. The NS recasts the target form. (93) The learner visibly notices the problem and produces an approving (94). The NS mitigates the exposed correction not to hurt the learner's sensitivity (95) and the NS starts metalinguistic talk justifying the mistake with a playful expression (96). The NS continues the mitigation sequence maintaining a playful attitude (97) and at the same time the social trajectory is maintained because the conversation keeps flowing (98). This repair sequence, similarly to the previous one, demonstrates that, since roles had been previously clarified since the beginning, William is carrying out his task of expert in the TL selected by correcting Pilar's mistake of pronunciation. In turn 95, William shows awareness of the fact that his pedagogical repair might endanger her partner's sensitivity and identity as a proficient learner and activates a strategy of mitigation to the mistake justifying his intervention. This means that he is aware that corrections might generate a zone of constriction where learning is impeded rather than fostered. When I interviewed him, I asked how he feels when he makes corrections and he explained to me that often it is not possible to correct people because it is hard to detect a mistake in the fast flowing of the conversation and to interrupt it. But he also pointed out that sometimes it is necessary to correct a mistake when this occurs again and he usually corrects his peers when they repeat the same mistake later on in the conversation. In his accounts, he narrated that there was a Spanish language partner who used to overcorrect him because he was sure that, thanks to his interventions, William would speak a perfect Spanish in one year. The relationship ended because the two partners in the end did not agree on a common strategy to handle both social and learning trajectories. This excerpt and these accounts prove that William is aware of these dynamics when playing both the roles of learner and expert and he recognises that an overcorrective behaviour might determine an impoverishment of opportunities to use and learn the L2 because the identity of the language partner is vulnerable.

The next excerpt will illustrate another crucial aspect related to corrective feedback, which is embedded correction:

Excerpt 1.3

- 108 P: Yes I'm going to buy a fresh turkey.
109 W: Fresh turkey yeah.
110 P: Yes. I encargar (1), I enchar... (2) I asked for a turkey.
111 W: Ah you order...ordered one.
112 P: Bothered?
113 W: Ordered. You ordered one.
114 P: Ah ok. I ordered for a fresh turkey several weeks ago and tomorrow I'm going to buy it.

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback for this excerpt:

| 4.5 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.3 | |
|----------------------------------|----------|
| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
| Lexical | To order |
| Self-correction | Turn 110 |
| Clarification request | Turn 112 |
| Embedded | Turn 111 |
| Other correction | Turn 113 |

In this excerpt, Pilar and William are talking about their plans for Christmas. As it is possible to observe, in turn 110, Pilar's L1 is interfering. The Spanish word "encargar" interferes and Pilar is about to produce the utterance "to encharge", which is not suitable to this context. The learner does not complete the utterance because she has realised that this word is not correct. In the same turn, she activates an avoidance strategy to maintain the social trajectory and says "I asked for". The avoidance is a strategy used by learners when they replace the adequate form with another due to the fact that they lack of the linguistic resources necessary to express the original form (Tarone, 1981). William, without interrupting the intersubjectivity, offers the correct word "on the flow", in an embedded way (turn 111). In turn 112, Pilar's clarification request is aimed to incorporate the new word and William solves the clarification request sequence (113). In turn 114, Pilar incorporates the new word even though not perfectly because she produces the utterance "I ordered for a fresh turkey" instead of "I ordered a fresh turkey".

This sequence is significant because it shows embedded correction at a lexical level. Embedded correction is usually opposed to explicit correction and it consists in implicit indirect feedback (Gass, 1997; Tudini, 2010) not to interrupt the conversational flow. It

permits interactants to correct with discretion and it is considered as the least likely to draw learners' attention to the formal aspects of a conversation (Tudini, 2010). The fact that William has corrected his partner in such a way indicates that he is sensitive towards her learning process and does not want to break the intersubjectivity between them.

The next excerpt is an extract from a dialogue between William and Marisol, who is one of William's main language partners. William and Marisol were studying together and both were preparing the higher intermediate level of their respective TL, Spanish and English. In this dialogue William is describing to Marisol the Christmas gift he bought to his cousin and he is highly involved in the topic of the conversation. The sequence is significant because it shows a difficult pedagogical repair in the form of lexical correction.

Excerpt 1.4

- 58 W: ¿Tendrás exámenes el jueves?
Do you have exams on Thursday?
- 59 M: ¿El jueves?
On Thursday?
- 60 W: El jueves. Es el cumpleaños de mi primo George.
On Thursday. It's my cousin George's birthday.
- 61 M: Ah. ¿El jueves es el cumpleaños de tu primo George?
Ah. Is your cousin George's birthday on Thursday?
- 62 W: Sí Sí.
Yeab yeab.
- 63 M: ¡Pues hombre felicidades de mi parte!
So, happy birthday from me man!
- 64 W: (hhh) Sí, gracias.
(bbb) Yes, thanks.
- 65 M: Nosotros decimos aquí "felicidades" o "feliz cumpleaños".
Here we use to say "felicidades" or "feliz cumpleaños".
- 66 W: Cump...ehm le he comprado un equipo de herrameintos [mispronounced, correct form "herramientas"]
Cump...ehm I bought a tool kit for him.
- 67 M: De herramientas, no?
Of herramientas (tools), right?
- 68 W: Una...ehm una cosa para meter el peso
So...ehm something through which you can put some weight on.
- 69 M ¿El queso?
Cheese?
- 70 W: El peso

- Weight.*
- 71 M: Sí.
Yeab.
- 72 W: Y sus padres dicen: “¿Qué haces? Es equipo para hacer (...)”. Y le dije que no...no no no, es para el régimen de la comida (hhh).
And his parents say: “What are you doing? This is a kit to make (...)”. And I said that it’s not...no no no, this is for his food regime (bbb).
- 73 M: O sea le has comprado un equipo de herramientas...
You mean you bought a tool kit...
- 74 W: Harrimientas sí.
- 75 M: <herramientas>
- 76 W: Herramientos.
- 77 M: Herramienta (1) tools, ¿no?
Herramientas (1) tools, isn’t it?
- 78 W: Sí sí.
Yeab yeab
- 79 M: ¿Pero las herramientas para qué son?
But what are these tools for?

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback of this excerpt. The nature of the mistake in this conversational event is phonological:

Table 4.6 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.4

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|--|---|
| Phonological | Herramientas vs harrimeintos, harrimientas, herramientas (turns 66-74-76) |
| Other-correction (by Marisol as a NS) | Turns 75-77 |
| Exposed correction | Turns 75-77 |
| Continuers (by Marisol as a NS) | ¿Pero las herramientas para qué son? (turn 79) <i>But what are these tools for?</i> |
| Confirmation check (by Marisol as a NS) | ¿El jueves? <i>On Thursday?</i> (turn 59) Ah. ¿El jueves es el cumpleaños de tu primo George? (turn 61) <i>Ab. Is your cousin George’s birthday on Thursday?</i> ¿De herramientas, no? <i>Of herramientas, right?</i> (turn 67) ¿El queso? <i>Cheese?</i> (turn 69) Herramientas...tools, ¿no? (turn 77) |

In turns 58-64, William and Marisol are following the social trajectory. These sequence is characterised by two confirmation checks (turns 59 and 61). In turn 65, Marisol activates a learning trajectory in parallel with the social one by informing her language partner about the two forms to say “happy birthday” in Spanish. In turn 66, William seems to accept the pedagogical intervention and then persists with the social trajectory producing an incorrect utterance. This phonological mistake triggers two confirmation check sequences (turns 67-68 and turns 69-71). In turns 72-73, William and Marisol proceed with the social trajectory and Marisol seems to start another confirmation check sequence

(turn 73) to verify that she has understood correctly the content of the previous lines. This turn might also be interpreted as an attempt by Marisol to repair William's incorrect utterance in turn 66 implicitly (embedded correction). William answers the confirmation check and seems to accept the correction but, in doing so, he produces another incorrect utterance of the same word "herramientas" (turn 74). Turn 74 is followed by a pedagogical repair initiated by the NS, Marisol, in which the NS makes use of the teacher and foreigner talk. This means that the NS engages in a type of simplified talk when speaking with NNSs. In this case, the fact that Marisol is using a slower speech and clearer pronunciation (turn 75) signals that she is collaborating to construct opportunities for William to interact in his L2. The correction is accepted but intake does not occur since the word is incorrect again (turn 76). The NS recasts it and self initiates a comprehension check to negotiate meaning, as it is signalled by the use of the code-switching as a verification strategy (turn 77). Marisol wants to verify that William associates "herramientas" to its equivalent English word "tools" and check whether the meaning of the word is clear to him. William confirms to know the word even though he does not provide the correct utterance (turn 78). The NS does not further check whether learning occurred and recasts the correct utterance by opening a new sequence and maintaining the conversational trajectory (turn 79).

Previous literature (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977; Tudini, 2010) has found that other-correction is not infrequent when the learner is not very competent in his TL, as in the case of this interactional episode. In this sense, the correction exchanges in this partnership represent "one vehicle for socialization" (Tudini, 2010:104).

In the following excerpt, Marisol and William are about to end the conversation and to arrange another meeting. In the case of this interaction, Marisol was about to take the B2 exam of English on the following Thursday and she is explaining to William that she found a remedy to fight against anxiety during the exam. I identified three types of peer assistance provision that had been previously codified in the qualitative analysis of the interviews. Emotional assistance, as indicated by William encouraging Marisol overcome the exam pressure (10), co-collaboration between the two interactants in a word search sequence where the learner autonomously finds the solution to the linguistic problem (15) and confirmation check enacted by the NNS and promptly resolved by the NS (15-17).

Excerpt 1.5

- 10 W: Sí, muchas gracias y que tengas mucha suerte en examen pero no necesitas porque puedes hablar perfectamente.
Yes, many thanks and I wish you lots of luck for the exam though you don't need it since you can speak perfectly.
- 11 M: Muchas gracias por los ánimos. [Tendré que...
Thank you so much for the encouragement [I will have to...
- 12 W: [No, es la verdad.
[No, it's the truth.
- 13 M: ...que tomar (1) ¿"tile" [pronounced as /taɪl/]? ¿"Tile" es, no? "Tile"(2) ahí ¿cómo era?(2) ¿infusión? ¿Tile tea? ¿Herb tea?
...to take (1) "tile" [pronounced as /taɪl/]? It's "Tile" ins'tit? "Tile" (2) oh, how was it? (2) infusion? Tile tea? Herbal tea?
- 14 W: ¿Perdón? (hbb)
Sorry?
- 15 M: Ahí espérate espérate espérate. Espera espera que busco una palabra espérate (.) un momentito (.) tengo que ver una cosa aquí, ahí no puedo (.) (...) a ver (.) un momentito [typing the word] mmm (.) camomila tea pero es té de manzanilla pero yo digo (...) tila (.) mmm (.) a ver tila [typing] aaaah lime blusom [/'blusəm/](1) blossom? [/'blɒsəm/]
- Oh, wait wait wait. Hold on, hold on let me check a word, wait...a moment (.) I have to check something here, oh, I can't (.) (...) let's see (.) one moment [typing the word] mmm (.) camomile tea but this is té de manzanilla but I mean (...) tila (.) mmm (.) let's see tila [typing] aaaah lime blusom [/'blusəm/]? (1) blossom? [/'blɒsəm/]*
- 16 W: Lime blossom.
- 17 M: ¡Ah! ¡Lime blossom es tila! Yo creía que era tile. Lime blossom tea.
Ah! Lime blossom is tila! I thought it was "tile". Lime blossom tea.

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback of this excerpt. The repair sequence is connected to the word “tila”:

Table 4.7 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.5

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|--|---|
| Lexical | Tila/Tile |
| Phonological | [/'blusəm/]/ [/'blɒsəm/] |
| Affective | “pero no necesitas porque puedes hablar perfectamente.” |
| Self-correction (by Marisol as a NNS) | Tila/Tile [/'blusəm/]/ [/'blɒsəm/] |
| Clarification request | ¿Perdón? (hbb) <i>Sorry?</i> |

In turn 10, William provides emotional support and, in turn 11, Marisol welcomes the emotional support provided by William. At the same time, a new trajectory is launched (11), a trajectory that is overlapped (11-12) to the previous adjacency pairs. Then, the learner notices the use of the not target-like expression “tile” (13) and, without the NS intervention, she attempts several self-repairs in the same turn, as indicated by the question mark. Here noticing and linguistic collaboration lead to a “slowing down” of the conversation (Beauvois, 1992). The NS is not able to provide adequate assistance (14) and triggers a word search self-repair sequence in which the learner “holds on the floor” (15) through several interactional resources (Schegloff, 1979), that is, by the adoption of filling words like “espérate”...“un momentito” and by typing the word on the online dictionary, one of the affordances of the textual chat in CMC. Finally, the learner finds the word through the aid of the online dictionary, which is a signal of digital critical literacy, but she mispronounces it (15) and this action triggers another self-repair sequence followed by a self repair attempt and a comprehension check (15). The NS (16) resolves the clarification request related to both the word search and the pronunciation mistake and the learner confirms understanding (17), concluding this successful self-repair sequence. This repair sequence would have been even more successful if William had explained to Marisol the meaning of the English word “tile”.

In the next extract, it is William who initiates a self-repair but he seems to ignore the assistance offered by the NS probably because he is involved in the social aspect of the interaction.

Excerpt 1.6

- 28 W: Ah sí sí porque el (.) ¿el zuma? La zuma de limón [contiene
Ah yeah yeah because el (.) el zuma? La zuma de limón [has got
- 29 M: [el zumo de limón.
[el zumo de limón.
- 30 W: [contiene] químicas que matan las bacterias [mispronounced, correct form “bac-
 terias”], las levaduras y las (.) virus [incorrect, correct form “los virus”].
[has got] chemical substances that kill bacteria, yeasts and (.) viruses.
- 31 M: Sí y además el zumo de limón quita la náusea.
Yeah, besides lemon juice takes nausea away.

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback of this excerpt. In this case all the instances are around the same correction:

Table 4.8 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.6

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|--|--|
| Morphosyntactic Exposed correction (by Marisol as a NS) | El zuma/la zuma vs el zumo (turns 28-29) |
| Other-correction (by Marisol as a NS) | (turns 28-29) |

In turn 28, William is seeking for assistance. In fact, in the recording, the intonation of the speech (signalled by the question mark) indicates hesitation and request of confirmation check by his language partner. William is aware that he might be using a not target-like expression. In fact, in turn 28, he pronounces an incorrect utterance through the wrong use of the female gender “zuma” for the Spanish masculine noun “zumo” (juice) together with the masculine article “el” that agrees with “zumo” but does not agree with the inexistent word “zuma”. Marisol’s intervention (turn 29), where she recasts the correct utterance “el zumo”, is provided slightly delayed, when the learner has already launched the trajectory (turn 28) of explaining the beneficial effects of lemon juice, as we can see in turns 28 and 30. In this oral conversation, the overlapping voices (28-29) do not favour noticing and the approving of the learner. William attempted self-repair in the same turn (29) opting for the feminine gender in agreement with the feminine article “la zuma” and he might have not noticed the correction made by Marisol. A possible explanation could be that he is so involved in the social trajectory that he is not concerned on whether his previous utterance is correct or not. Marisol accepts his decision and we do not have the evidence that her recast “zumo de limón” in turn 31 is uttered with the intention of providing William with a further pedagogical repair. Interestingly, Marisol seems to have decided to ignore “bacterias” and “viruses” in order to maintain the flow of the conversation.

This sequence and the table show that, despite William being autonomous and aware about his learning process, there are aspects that he cannot always control. However, when I interviewed him, he commented that he was conscious of the fact that conversational and social trajectories were often competing when talking with Marisol. He also mentioned that he and his language partners do not usually have a fix topic and decide to talk about anything. Moreover, in his diary entries he underlined the need to establish

more structured conversations with his language partners and to find activities that should be more focused on the exam. On the contrary, as the online data seem to indicate, Marisol asked for assistance more actively and paid more attention to the input provided by her language partners. In the following sequence, she initiates a repair sequence and she accepts the prompt assistance of the NS.

Excerpt 1.7

- 60 M: (*bbb*) so it was very funny because we were about (...) that use to go to a brewery, a bar (...) in Trafalgar Square in London.
- 61 W: Ah yeah.
- 62 M: There there was a man playing (.) I don't know (.) "acordeón" in Spanish (1)
- 63 W: Accordion.
- 64 M: Accordion.
- 65 W: Squeezebox.

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback for this excerpt, which is related to a lexical LRE:

Table 4.9 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.7

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Lexical | Acordeón/accordion and squeezebox |
| Continuers | “Ah yeah”. (turn 61) |

In this word search sequence, the learner seeks for the assistance of the NS (62) by an explicit assistance request. The NS promptly provides feedback (63). The feedback is approved (intake) (64) and the NS (65) recasts an alternative that is ignored by the learner, who wants to go on with the conversational trajectory.

In the following excerpt, there is another case of embedded correction. This time the language strategy is activated by William’s language partner. Marisol is explaining to William the reason why they could not meet in *Skype* the previous Friday in order to practice their respective TL. The exchange gives rise to an implicit correction sequence at a morphosyntactic level.

Excerpt 1.8

- 37 M: El estómago lo tenía...vamos te mandé el mail porque me acosté... me acosté porque no me sentía [bien]
[me] I had the stomach...well I sent you the email because I went to bed...I went to bed because I didn't feel [well]
- 38 W: [Ah sí] el viernes... porque no podemos [podíamos (this Spanish verbal form does not exist)]
[Ah yeah] last Friday...because we [couldn't]
- 39 M: [Claro.
[Exactly.
- 40 W: hablar.
talk.
- 41 M: No pudimos hablar.
We couldn't talk
- 42 W: No...
No...
- 43 M: No pudimos hablar porque yo te mandé el mail y me acosté porque me sentía muy mal.
We couldn't talk because I sent you the email and I went to bed since I was very sick
- 44 W: Yeah

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback for this excerpt.

Table 4.10 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.8

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|--|------------------------------|
| Morphosyntactic | No pudimos (turns 41 and 43) |
| Embedded | Turns 41 and 43 |
| Self-correction (by William as a NNS) | Turn 38 |
| Other-correction | Turns 41 and 43 |

In turn 37, Marisol is informing William about the reason why their online meeting was cancelled. In turn 38, William is following the conversation but, in doing so, he is not able to conjugate the verb “poder” (in English “can”) in the “pretérito simple”, which is equivalent to the English simple past. First he adopts the form of the present tense “podemos”, and then he attempts a self-correction and recasts “podíamos”, which in Spanish language does not exist. The verb “poder” is irregular in Spanish and the correct form of the pretérito is “pudimos”. The form “podíamos”, recast incorrectly by William,

is probably due to the fact that he is following the general rule of regular verbs ending in “AR”. Marisol recasts the correct form (turn 41) by integrating it in the context of the conversation and confirming (turn 43) her previous utterance in turn 37. However, William seems not to notice the embedded correction because he seems not to provide any sign of correction acceptance.

These sections have focused on the main patterns, the main strategies and the several forms of assistance activated by William and his language partners most of the times consciously. The next section will deal with code-switching as a strategy adopted by learners to actively create opportunities to practice the TL.

4.2.3. Language selection and its negotiation

In this interaction William and Marisol are talking about different forms of greetings according to gender differences, about men not kissing each other but simply hugging each other. The two activities they are carrying out, learning and socializing, are proceeding in parallel. In this sequence they have adopted English as conversational code but later on in the conversation William switches to Spanish with a specific assistance request, as signalled by the arrow in turn 4.

Excerpt 1.9

- 1 M: (...) you know how to say the way of (1)"saludarse"? How do you say it? Of (.) ayuda (.) greeting! It's a way of greeting.
- 2 W: Greeting yeah yeah.
- 3 M: Damned me, I didn't remember the word in English! If that happens to me it's terrible!
- 4 W: ¿Qué es la palabra en español?
What's the word in Spanish?
- 5 M: ¿De qué? ¿De "greeting"?
Of what? Of "greeting"?
- 6 W: Greeting.
- 7 M: Saludo.
- 8 W: Saludó. Saludo.
- 9 M: <Saludo>. "Saludo" es el nombre y "saludar" el verbo.
"Saludo" is the noun and "saludar" the verb.
- 10 W: El verbo "saludar". The noun and the verb.
The verb "saludar". The noun and the verb.

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback of this excerpt, which revolves around the same instance both under the lexical and phonological aspect:

Table 4.11 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.9

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|--|---|
| Phonological | W: “Saludó. Saludo” M:<Saludo>. “Saludo” es el nombre y “saludar” el verbo (turn 9) |
| Lexical | M: “you know how to say the way of (1)“saludarse”?” |
| Self-correction (by Marisol as a NNS) | M: “you know how to say the way of (1)“saludarse”? How do you say it? Of (.) ayuda (.) greeting! It's a way of greeting.” |
| Self-correction (by William as a NNS) | W: “Saludó. Saludo” |
| Exposed correction | Turn 9 |
| Other-correction | Turn 9 |

In turn 1, Marisol starts a self-repair sequence because she is searching the equivalent in English of the Spanish word “saludarse”, which corresponds to the English word “greetings”. William does not know the Spanish word for “greetings”. Finally, Marisol is able to find the correct word. In turn 2, William confirms and provides his assistance although delayed. Turn 3 is characterized by metalinguistic talk in which the learner in all likelihood is asking for an emotional assistance that the NS does not provide. In fact, in turn 4, William ignores the metalinguistic trajectory and decides to use code-switching to signal his willingness to create opportunities to use Spanish by launching a new repair sequence. I argue that William operates a participant-related switching (Auer, 1984, 1988) (speaker’s preference for one language or another) because he is driven by the goal of using and improving his Spanish. This participant-related switching underlines that the learner is actively constructing opportunities to practice Spanish asking Marisol a question about the same topic. In turns 5-7, Marisol accepts this language negotiation, replies in Spanish and is ready to provide assistance. This launches another sequence of adjacency pairs in which William does not understand where the word is stressed (8) (he thinks in the last syllable). In turn 9, Marisol employs foreigner talk using slow speed, clear pronunciation and then she explains which is the verb form and which is the noun form (9). William accepts the feedback and reselects English as code of interaction (10).

These utterances underline how learners in their exchange partnership collaboratively co-construct opportunities to interact with their partners in the L2 in an authentic context. Drawing on AT, it is possible to maintain that both Marisol and William, respectively in turns 1 and 4, seem to utilize their respective TL as a mediating artifact, which enable them to effectively achieve their goal to seek for assistance in the TL. They are active subjects. This approach incorporating AT and Auer's approach to bilingual interaction is a valuable way to explore some major factors that contribute to learners' construction of opportunities to use the language. One of these factors is norms and social roles within the community where learners are situated. They have agreed on the roles as experts and novices of the TL and this does not generate problems and misunderstanding at the moment of the language selection.

The next excerpt will focus on the code-switching aspect more in depth and will illustrate how the collaboration between the two interactants leads to the co-construction of an utterance.

Excerpt 1.10

- 163 M: ¡Qué susto! ¿No?
How frightening! Isn't it?
- 164 W: Eh sí, es muy peligroso.
Oh yes, it's very dangerous.
- 165 M: Ésta es una expresión coloquial: "¡Qué susto! ¿No?"
This is a colloquial expression: "¡Qué susto! ¿No?"
- 166 W: Susto...
Susto... [fright in Spanish]
- 167 M: "Qué susto"...es..."was freegthen" [intended "how frightening"] ¿no? Como "what a scare" ¿no?
"Qué susto"...is..."was freegthen" isn't it? It's like "what a scare" isn't it?
- 168 W: Frightening...frightening.
- 169 M: Frightening.
- 170 W: Yeah.
- 171 M: Frightening.
- 172 W: Yeah yeah.
- 173 M: Because you don't know (.) you don't say "what a scare", no?
- 174 W: No, you say "how frightening".
- 175 M: <How frightening> [she is writing]

- 176 W: Qué susto.
 177 M: How frightening (1) because is impersonal (1) how frightening (1) how frightening.
 178 W: Yeah.
 → 179 M: Qué susto...pues sí, el cable se peló seguramente y al pelarse el cable y tocar entre los dos polos pues salió ardiendo, ¿no?
How frightening...well yeah, the cable got unthreaded and when this occurred the two poles came into contact and it burned, right?

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback for this excerpt:

Table 4.12 Peer feedback in excerpt 1.10

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Lexical | Freeghten/frightening What a scare |
| Confirmation check | Turns 167 and 173 |
| Other-correction | Turns 168, 174 |
| Co-construction | Turns 167-175 |

William and Marisol are talking about an electricity cable that burned in William’s house, which might have generated a fire. William is explaining the episode using his TL, Spanish. In turns 163-164, William and Marisol are commenting the episode and in turn 163 Marisol introduces the Spanish expression “Qué susto”. Then, in turn 165, Marisol shifts to the learning trajectory opening a sequence where she recasts the previous Spanish expression and William seems to confirm that he accepts the explanation (turn 166). Marisol insists on the learning trajectory (turn 167) and she starts a confirmation check where recasts the equivalent in English twice. To this regard, it is possible to say that Marisol is moved by the two-fold objective of checking whether her language partner has correctly understood the meaning of “Qué susto!” and opening the opportunity to improve her TL by looking for the equivalent phrase in English. Turn 167 gives start to a co-construction sequence (167-175), where the two interactants collaborate to find the correct expression in Marisol’s TL. First (turn 168), William repairs Marisol (168), Marisol accepts the repair and recasts (169), then William confirms that the recast is correct (170). Then Marisol further recasts (171), William further confirms (172) and the repair sequence ends. Later on, Marisol switches to her TL (as signalled by the arrow in turn 173) to start another confirmation check sequence. In this sequence, she wants to confirm that the second utterance formulated in turn 167, which is a literary translation from Spanish, is not correct. She also has the objective to find out the equivalent expres-

sion in the TL. In the case of turn 173, it is possible to say that Marisol is using her TL as a mediational tool to open opportunities for learning and that the learning trajectory has overtaken the social trajectory. Therefore, the code-switching is used in her ZPD and she needs a more capable peer to solve her language problem and develop in her interlanguage process. In turn 174, William is able to recast the correct equivalent of “Qué susto” in Marisol’s TL, the learner activates the strategy to note down the new words acquired. As narrated during the recall interview, William and his language partner used to take notes during their partnership and tended to recheck them in a later moment. This is an important indicator of learner autonomy and helps understand the reasons why their tandem partnership was successful. The sequence is solved effectively; while William recalls the same expression in his own TL (turn 176), Marisol, does the same in her own TL by means of metalanguage talk (turn 177). William finishes the sequence in turn 178 confirming Marisol’s previous utterances in turn 177. In turn 179, Marisol reselects her L1. This switch is different from the previous in turn 173 and it can be analysed as a topic change (Auer, 1988), which serves to organize the discourse in progress and to reactivate the social trajectory that had been lost. In all likelihood, Marisol’s code-switching indicates that she is utilizing her L1 as a mediational artifact to organize the ongoing discourse and to restore the previous conversation.

The tandem relationship between William and Marisol was generally based on equality and reciprocity. Moreover, both learners showed a clear and genuine interest in each other’s everyday life and culture. They offered advice, shared emotions and were keen to share each other’s views and opinions during their conversations, which covered a wide range of topics besides personal information. Language aspects and particular expressions were widely discussed, but also more complex issues related to the language learning process, which shows evidence of active learning. Both partners helped each other with error correction. Both William and Marisol were aware of the importance of error correction in this tandem partnership. In this respect, William thanked Marisol profusely for her corrections and, although in a more limited extent, looked for ways of correcting his partner in a manner that would be most helpful to her. Moreover, both were eager to negotiate error correction by asking questions, encouraging the partner, and offering advice and encouragement.

To conclude, in the case of William, who submitted the interactional data after having been interviewed and after having been instructed on the procedure to follow for the interactions, it is opportune to acknowledge that there is a certain (and not quantifiable) margin of biased data (see chapter 5, section 5.3.2 about contributions and limitations of the research).

4.3. Case 2 – Learner Nastya

Nastya is another social networker (learner profile 2). She has explored both *Livemocha* and *Busuu* and has made a wide use of the didactic resources of the former platform. During her second interview, she clarified her attitude towards the online communities better. She has a social network attitude for learning but, at the same time, she is reluctant to browse in search of language partners in *Livemocha* because she distrusts the people in it and she has been several times object of cyberflirting.

At the moment of the second interview (October 2012), Nastya had quit the platform because her priorities had changed and her first TL became German rather than English. Therefore, the tie between Nastya and her only language partner, an American NS, became weaker. She reported that she excluded the possibility to find language partners for studying German because her level was not proficient enough to have a conversation. However, she did not exclude the possibility to make use of the didactic resources of *Livemocha* to practice her basic knowledge of German.

4.3.1. Linguistic background

This learner was a 21-year-old Russian undergraduate student whose TL is English, advanced (C1) level. Her second TL was German (basic level), which she had studied at school. Unlike William, who intertwined many online contacts, Nastya, drawing from *Livemocha*, had been able to find one partner for language interaction, Tom, a NS of English. Nastya needed to create opportunities to use the TL because she had the specific object of going to the US for four months during summer. At the moment of the first interview to Nastya (December 2011), she had already spent her four months in the US and she reported that she had met Tom in *Livemocha* in February of that same year, that they had been pen pals for a period of 8 months, and that they were communicating even when she was in the US. She also added that she was very grateful to him because,

thanks to his help, her English improved a lot and she did not need any other online contact to practice.

Nastya's online data consist of *Skype* textual chat selections that cover a period that goes from February 2011 (when Nastya meets Tom in *Livemocha* for the first time) to October 2011 (when she is already back from the US). When I interviewed Nastya and I asked her to provide me with extracts from online interactions, she already had all the interactional data that will be presented in this part of the chapter related to her specific case study. She sent them to me after obtaining her language partner's permission. These data are particularly valuable and reliable for this analysis because they are not biased by the researcher's intervention (as in the case of case study 1 and 3) and they are a clear example of authentic and spontaneous online intercultural interaction.

4.3.2. *Language use patterns and opportunities*

Excerpt 2.1 illustrates an online textual chat between Nastya and her language partner, Tom, the American partner she met in *Livemocha*. As she explained in the interview, Nastya found Tom in *Livemocha* because she was looking for language partners with whom to practice the language since she had the intention of spending a period in the US. First she contacted him in *Livemocha* and then they moved to *Skype* for their interactions, which is a common feature among the participants interviewed. As she reports in her accounts, the relationship between her and Tom developed intensively and mainly consisted of video and textual chats: “*we did use Skype, we sometimes talk but most of the time we chat because we, sometimes we chat for about 5 hours, so...sometimes we do assignments or something and talking to me, that's what we do too*”.

All the conversations between the two only occur in English. As Nastya explained during the interview, little code-switching occurred since they tacitly agreed on this non-reciprocal language use and, consequently, the use of English to interact became customary. Utilizing the model of AT, it is possible to maintain that Tom and Nastya agreed on choosing English as a mediational artifact, that is, as the language of interaction for their partnership. This was due to the very basic level of Russian of Tom and to Nastya's strong intention to improve her language skills, having planned a stay in the US. In relation to her partner, it seems that Tom's reasons for establishing this partnership might be more focused on an exchange that he found rewarding mainly under the social point

of view since his objectives went beyond language learning. Nastya, during the first cycle of interview, commented about their non-reciprocal language use saying: *I think he wanted to learn, but he was a little bit lazy about this because it wasn't necessary to him (...). He didn't need to go to Russia, he was lazy about it, but he knows some words, just some simple words (...) sometimes some Russian words just for fun.* From a sociocultural perspective, it is possible to claim that this non-reciprocal language use is due to the fact that the two participants are driven by different motives, Nastya being engaged in language learning and Tom being involved in socializing. I argue that the absence of conflict for language preference depends on the fact that the two participants agreed on sharing their social roles as L2 learners as well as friends.

The excerpt below illustrates a repair sequence occurred in *Skype* textual chat where embedded correction occurs (turn 3). As the excerpt will show, in this conversation the implicit correction allows the maintenance of the social trajectory.

Excerpt 2.1

| | | |
|----|----|---|
| 76 | N: | well it's funny but I also like hills))) [heels] even though I'm tall some- times I wear it)))) |
| 77 | T: | hahaha |
| 78 | T: | yes, heels are nice too)) |
| 79 | N: | sorry |
| 80 | N: | heels))) |
| 81 | T: | LOL |
| 82 | T: | its ok |
| 83 | T: | i was confused at first (rofl) |

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback of this excerpt, which is around the word “heels”:

Table 4.13 Peer feedback in excerpt 2.1

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| Phonological | Hills/heels |
| Embedded correction (by Tom as a NS) | yes, heels are nice too)) (turn 78) |

| | |
|--|--|
| Other-correction (by Tom as a NS) | turn 78 |
| Affective | LOL its ok i was confused at first |

In this chat session, Nastya and Tom are engaged in an activity that is informal social interaction and are driven by the motive of intertwining their social relationship. On the other hand, as the interview further confirmed, there is another activity that Nastya is carrying out, language learning, driven by the motive of achieving a more proficient level of English. These motives shape the relationship between Nastya and Tom and the definition of their roles during their online interactions, Nastya being the novice and Tom the expert of the TL.

In turn 76, the NNS produces the incorrect object [hills] and makes a spelling mistake.²² In turn 77, the NS maintains the social trajectory replying the previous turn and does not interrupt the flow of the conversation. Moreover, he appears to be aware of the sensitivity of his interlocutor and, in order not to affect Nastya’s identity and self-image as a proficient learner of the L2 (Kurata, 2011), in turn 78 (in bold) he makes the correction “on the fly”. In other words, Tom produces the alternative [heels] without interrupting the conversational flow and by reincorporating the correct word in an interpersonal rather than pedagogical trajectory. In this way, online participants keep their intersubjectivity and both social and learning trajectories are maintained (Tudini, 2010).

The visual saliency (Tudini, 2010) typical of online interaction helps both of them and in particular the NNS in noticing her mistake, as the apologizing word in turn 79 demonstrates. The apologizing sequence is followed by another sequence (turn 80) where the NNS produces the alternative correct [heels]. The correct pushed output concludes the repair in turn 81, where the NS makes use of irony and of the chat acronym LOL (“Laughing Out Loud” and “Lot Of Laughs”). Turn 82 starts a sequence where Tom first seems to mitigate and soften the embedded correction and then seems to retrieve his previous playful attitude (83), providing a justification for his correction with another ironic acronym, ROFL (standing for “Rolling On the Floor Laughing”). The abbreviations (LOL in turn 81 and ROFL in turn 83) display a playful attitude of proximity to-

²² The learner also makes a grammar mistake using the pronoun “it” in place of “them” referring to the plural noun [heels] in turn 76. It is not possible to state whether the NS realised it or not. Therefore, since in this case the data do not provide clearer information, this study will not investigate this aspect further (indicating learners’ reasons for this choice, for instance).

wards the learner's error and, at the same time, provide an adequate conclusion to this successful repair sequence.

It is also worthy to underline that this excerpt shows a feature that is typical of online chats, that is, the presence of typographical, spelling and grammatical errors made by NSs, which are usually not corrected. In this case, "its" (turn 82) should be spelled as "it's" or "it is" in order not to generate confusion between the neuter form of the English possessive personal pronoun and the conjugation of the neuter third-person singular of the verb "to be". Even though this spelling is widely accepted also by NSs, these situations might create problems with less proficient NNSs than the learner of this online chat.

When I interviewed Nastya again, she immediately recalled this episode and she confessed to have felt very embarrassed for the mistake, stressing positively her partner's playful attitude towards her. In the *Skype* audio recording of her second cycle of her interview, she also claimed that the nature of the mistake was due to the pronunciation of "heel" /hi : l/ and "hill" /hɪl/, since she thought they had the same pronunciation: *"you know, in pronunciation in the US there are different sounds "e" which we don't have. They have high "e" sound which you write like two "ee" right? And they have like low "i" sound and I...it was a mistake, I thought it could be pronounced like "hills", it was my own mistake, it was really a mistake, I don't know why"*. Not only did she reflect on the phonetic difference of English vowels, which is a sign of a good level of metalinguistic competence, but she also explained the wrong association of idea that led her to the mistake: *Honestly, I thought that "hills", you know, is like mountains, high, and it has a different meaning for shoes because it makes shoes higher and I don't know why (laughing) I thought it should be written like this. And then I have realized that it's a mistake.*

This excerpt represents a repair sequence done by the NS in which Nastya and Tom negotiate the meaning of the word "school". Negotiation of meaning occurs when the interactants interrupt the conversation in order to achieve mutual understanding (Varonis & Gass, 1985). As Nastya explained during the recall interview, the misunderstanding originated from her wrong interpretation of the word "school" that in English has a generic connotation and includes any level of formal education: *(...) that was one of the things that I didn't know, I absolutely didn't know about English. I really didn't know that they can call*

“school” like any place when they get an education because in Russian “school” is only like primary, secondary and high school and all the other stuff can be called university, college or institute, never “school”. She added that her language partner was surprised to hear that she had already graduated from university because she is very young. At the same time, she was confused because she had told her language partner that she had completed the high school and that she was enrolled at the university.

Excerpt 2.2

- 37 T: lol, i think we are clashing cuz we speak different languages. When i say " are you in school?" that can mean any level, im just asking if you are in school?
- 38 T: lol
- 39 N: ah...ok.. I'm sorry
- 40 T: you get it now?
- 41 N: so school is also the University , right?
- 42 T: yes, any level
- 43 N: and anything where you can study?
- 44 T: its just a question, asking are you in school

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback of this excerpt, which deals with the word “school”:

Table 4.14 Peer feedback in excerpt 2.2

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|---|---|
| Lexical | School |
| Affective | “lol, i think we are clashing cuz we speak different languages. When i say " are you in school?" that can mean any level, im just asking if you are in school?” |
| Exposed correction (by Tom as a NS) | “When i say " are you in school?" that can mean any level, im just asking if you are in school?” (turn 37) |
| Other-correction (by Tom as a NS) | Turn 37 |
| Comprehension check (by Tom as a NS) | “you get it now?” |
| Clarification request (by Nastya as a NNS) | “so school is also the University , right?” “and anything where you can study?” |

As the excerpt shows, as soon as Tom realises the source of problem, he seems to mitigate his intervention making use of the empathetic abbreviation “lol” (turn 37) before operating the conversational adjustment (turn 37). In turn 38, Tom insists on his playful

attitude to manage his partner's loss of face during the repair sequence. The learner notices the mistake and apologises for the misunderstanding (turn 39). Then the NS starts a comprehension check sequence (turn 40). Turn 41 is followed by Nastya's negotiation of the meaning of the word "school" (turn 41). Tom confirms and completes the repair (turn 42). Then Nastya opens another repair sequence to further verify the meaning of the new acquired word (turn 43) and Tom concludes the conversational repair linking it to the beginning of the conversation to re-establish the social trajectory and the ongoing discourse (turn 44).

Looking at this excerpt, a possible interpretation could be that Tom seems not to be aware of that fact that his ironic attitude might danger the partnership with Nastya and affect her identity as a learner of the TL, preventing her from creating opportunities to use the language. However, during the recall interview, there was no evidence of Nastya's self-image being affected by a lack of sensitivity from her partner. In the interview, Nastya explained that, despite her embarrassment due to her mistake in this conversational episode, she appreciated and welcomed this negotiation of meaning sequence. Therefore, according to her accounts, it is possible to maintain that Tom's playful behaviour has not threatened Nastya's positive image as an L2 learner. The interpersonal space between the two partners has not become a "negative constriction zone" (Kurata, 2011:91) where the opportunities for the learner to use the L2 are constricted rather than empowered.

Instead, this repair sequence was successful because the problem arose during the conversation was solved by the mutual and active collaboration between the expert and the novice of the interaction. Moreover, the interview revealed that the learner apperceived and then reflected on this lexical issue (school) after the conversation, and when she had the possibility she employed the word again because meaningful understanding occurred, which means, following Gass (1997), that she stored the new knowledge (intake) and in a later stage she transformed it into active knowledge (integration and output): *I really didn't know but it really helped me when I came to the US because I already knew that. At first it really blew my mind because I had no idea about "school". For me it was a little bit new and uncomfortable because we don't use it in this way but now I got used to it and it's pretty funny.*

The next excerpt exhibits a similar situation. According to case study 2's accounts, the NS's behaviour did not threaten her image and identity as a learner.

Excerpt 2.3

- 70 T: i have a **sweet tooth** sometimes
 71 N: you mean toothpaste?
 72 T: LOL!
 73 T: nooooo
 74 N: so what did you mean?
 75 T: a sweet tooth; its when you have a gi-
 gantic urge for sweets

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback of this excerpt, which is around the instance “sweet tooth”.

Table 4.15 Peer feedback in excerpt 2.3

| Peer feedback and Excerpt LREs | |
|--|--|
| Lexical | Sweet tooth/toothpaste |
| Affective | LOL |
| Exposed correction (by Tom as a NS) | “nooooo” (...) “a sweet tooth; its when you have a gigantic urge for sweets” (turn 75) |
| Other-correction (by Tom as a NS) | Turn 75 |
| Clarification request (by Nastya as a NNS) | “so what did you mean?” |

The NS adopts the trouble source expression “sweet tooth” indicated in bold (turn 70) that triggers a negotiation of meaning repair sequence initiated by Nastya (turn 71). The NS's response starts in turn 73 after laughing (turn 72). This trigger a further request of clarification by the learner to achieve mutual understanding (turn 74) and finally Tom, the NS, resolves the repair sequence (turn 75).

The correction sequence did not seem to break the intersubjectivity between the two speakers and did not affect Nastya's sensitivity. To this regard, during the interview she confessed that she was pleased to have been corrected and that she found this correction episode amusing when reflecting on it. Moreover, since this specific recall interview was conducted several months after this online conversation, I wanted to test whether she remembered the meaning of the expression “sweet tooth” and whether she had stored the new knowledge. When I asked her what a “sweet tooth” is (this was one of the per-

sonalized questions of the interview script prepared for her) she immediately recalled the episode and gave me the exact definition of “sweet tooth”. She also added that she did not employ the input in other conversations (output) because she did not have the chance to do it but that she would be able to recognise it and to employ it in the adequate way. She also underlined that, since that moment, she started taking into account idiomatic expressions more frequently.

The next sequence is an example of major types of assistance provided by the NS and the learner’s active orientation to enrich her knowledge of her TL. This episode shows intercultural competence sharing between learner and NS.

Excerpt 2.4

- | | | |
|----|----|--|
| 1 | T: | The slang in NY is very different from the slang here in California |
| 2 | T: | people might laugh if you use it in certain places |
| 3 | N: | o-oh... (blush) so it means if say smth in NY this can have the different meaning in CA? |
| 4 | T: | it will have the same meaning, and people will for the most part will understand you, but they will think it is wierd |
| 5 | T: | well heres the thing. America has so many types of ethnic backgrounds so thats why there are certain slang. |
| 6 | T: | for instance, In california we have pizza, in NY they call it pie |
| 7 | T: | there are soo many ways to say shoes in slang such as sneakers, sneaks, kicks |
| 8 | N: | kicks is only for sneakers? i guess it's not lady's shoes, right?)) |
| 9 | T: | kicks are like tennis shoes, like nikes or jordans |
| 10 | T: | kicks is a slang word for sneakers |
| 11 | T: | A movie you might want to watch for more slang is "Love dont cost a thing" Nick Cannon is in it, I dont know if you know who who that is, its a prett good movie |

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback of this excerpt:

Table 4.16 Peer feedback in excerpt 2.4

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|---|---|
| Lexical | Kicks/sneakers |
| Clarification request (by Nastya as a NNS) | “kicks is only for sneakers? i guess it's not lady's shoes, right?” |

Excerpts 2.4 demonstrates how the NS and Nastya actively participate in the process of jointly enhancing Nastya’s level of proficiency in the TL, reaching more understanding in the learner’s lexical and intercultural competence. Turns 1 and 2 see the NS actively involved in providing the learner with more information about the slang differences in the US, according to the State. In turn 3, Nastya, as signalled by the emoticon representing embarrassment (“blush”) shows her vulnerability to the intercultural issue introduced by her language partner and takes the initiative in orienting the conversation to the differences in lexical items according to the geographical location. In the following turns, Tom provides assistance to Nastya by improving her lexical knowledge at a higher level offering intercultural information (turns 4-5) as well as direct examples (turns 6-7) to clarify the trajectory that they both have launched and are co-constructing. In turn 8, the learner takes the initiative a new time asking for clarification and the NS provides it (turns 9-10). The sequence is concluded by an intercultural stimulus provided by the NS, who suggests Nastya a movie to encourage and improve her learning (turn 11).

This passage was remarkable because it represents an example of slang use and of sharing intercultural competence. The NS plays his role of expert both of English and American-English jargon and is actively encouraged by the learner (turns 3-8). About the use of jargon, Nastya pointed out that her discomfort and embarrassment when dealing with such episodes: *Sometimes when I see slang I feel a little bit uncomfortable because I'm not sure I understand what he is saying. But if I really feel like getting out of the subject and I don't understand I ask. Well, if I sort of understand I can just check it out in the dictionary.* To this regard, she mentioned that John, an American friend they had in common and Nastya’s second language partner after Tom, suggested her consulting the online *Urban Dictionary* (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/>). This demonstrates that online chat language learners are digitally skilled and active users of the web resources, and that their peer assistance includes giving suggestions and sharing intercultural or didactic links.

Moreover, as previous literature stressed, the use of jargon and linguistic variety (Crystal, 2006) often create problems of understanding especially if learners are novice to the TL (Tudini 2010). In this case, however, being Nastya a more competent user of the TL and being both the interactants mutually involved in providing and receiving assistance in improving the learner's lexical and intercultural knowledge, the sequence proves to be successful. From a sociocultural perspective, this part of the interaction between Nastya and Tom can be analysed in the following way: Tom is providing assistance to Nastya, which allows Nastya to interpret the interaction at a higher level than she would be able to do alone (by clarifying the use of “pizza”, “pie” and “kicks” and “sneakers”). Such assistance in Nastya's ZPD can potentially enable her to internalize the new lexical and sociocultural inputs so that she is able to perform better in her TL.

4.3.3. *Language selection and its negotiation*

So far I have analyzed Nastya in her role of novice and proficient learner of the TL. With reference to this case study, in my corpus data there is little evidence of code-switching and reversed roles because of the non-reciprocal roles Nastya and Tom tacitly agreed on. The following is one of the few examples that show Nastya in the role of expert of her own language. However, despite sharing her knowledge of her native language, Russian, the common code adopted for the interaction is English, used as lingua franca, since Tom's level of Russian is too basic to communicate.

Excerpt 2.5

- | | | | |
|---|----|----|--|
| | 12 | N: | so about Russian? |
| | 13 | N: | you want to know some, right? |
| | 14 | T: | yesssss |
| | 15 | T: | i want to know it all , lol |
| | 16 | N: | you already have some questions? |
| | 17 | T: | yes |
| → | 18 | T: | Da Yes |
| | 19 | T: | when do you know when to change the end-ings of words |
| | 20 | T: | there are words that change when used in conjunction of another word |
| | 21 | T: | how do I know when? |

| | | |
|----|----|--|
| 22 | N: | oohh.. i think it depends of a question |
| 23 | N: | so... we have 6 variations of ending almost for each noun |
| 24 | T: | ok |
| 25 | N: | in nominative case you don't change anything |
| 26 | T: | How do you know english so well? |
| 27 | N: | I didn't know " nominative case " - I've just watched this in dictionary)) |
| 28 | N: | (blush) do you have any grammar books or smth to help you in learning Russian? |
| 29 | N: | because it's hard to explain cases in 2 words)) |
| 31 | T: | haha, you are funny :) yes I do have many Russian learning books |
| 32 | T: | yes i understand, it can be difficult to explain |
| 33 | N: | I know I am)) but mostly I know English from movies |
| 34 | N: | some interviews of my favorites |
| 35 | N: | songs as well |
| 36 | T: | lol, thats how im trying to learn Russian |

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback of this excerpt:

Table 4.17 Peer feedback in excerpt 2.5

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|------------------------------|---|
| Affective | “How do you know english so well?” |
| Continuers | “N: so about Russian?” |
| (by Tom as a NNS) | N: you want to know some, right? T: yesssss T: i want to know it all , lol” |
| | “N: so... we have 6 variations of ending almost for each noun T: ok” |
| Clarification request | “how do I know when?” |
| (by Tom as a NNS) | |

This excerpt presents Nastya’s in difficulty in her role of expert of Russian taking the other side and giving explanations. Firstly, Tom displays his interest in approaching Russian language. In doing so, he only timidly attempts creating an opportunity to use his TL in turn 18 through the Russian affirmation word “da” typed in the transliterated form. But, in the following turn (turn 19), he immediately reselects English. One explanation for this action could be that he does not want to expose himself too much. Tom asks for her assistance (turns 20-21-22) about one of the toughest and crucial grammar issues for someone approaching Russian language, that is, its complex declinational sys-

tem, consisting of six cases (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental and prepositional) whose suffixes (word endings) denote the context of the word. In turns 22, 23 and 25 Nastya tries to provide assistance and Tom follows her (turn 24). In turn 26, Tom launches another trajectory in which he praises Nastya for her high level competence of English due to her adoption of the technical word “nominative” in turn 25, reversing the roles a new time. In turn 27, Nastya seems to mitigate the praise and honestly confesses that she did not know the translation of the word in English. Then, in the following turn, she expresses her embarrassment, signalled by “blush”, a probable emoticon (turn 28), and she seems willing to give up her role of expert of Russian, by suggesting other didactical resources that might suit his partner’s needs better (turns 28 and 29).

Tom accepts her decision (turns 31 and 32) and Nastya returns to her role of learner mentioning her experience as an English learner (turns 33-34-35), which seems to be inspiring for Tom (turn 36).

This sequence is significant because it shows that NSs are not always capable of providing adequate assistance only for being experts of the TL. During the interview, Nastya confessed that she felt uncomfortable when explaining Russian cases: *I studied it like 11 years and sometimes I can still have a question, I still doubt if I'm saying it wrong, you know, occasionally I haven't used some particular words. Because it's barely possible to understand it, to describe in such a short time plus in English there are no cases. If you are German it would be much easier because you also have it. But I felt a little bit confused because I didn't know how to explain it. And I just tried it to explain it in few words because I know that his Russian is very low and I thought that it's not the time yet to concentrate in such things as grammar. I thought that on his level it's much more important to learn new words instead of this grammar stuff because the people would still understand.*

Being a NS makes her an expert of the TL but not of the grammar and it does not necessarily mean that she has the authority to correct and explain competently what the learners expects her to be able to do (Jefferson, 1987).

On the contrary, in the following passage Nastya is more able to take her role of expert of the TL because the context does not require deep grammar explanations.

Excerpt 2.6

- 45 N: ты учишь русский или нет времени сейчас?)
 ty uchish' rusckiy ili net vremeni seychas?)
are you learning Russian or you don't have time now?
- 46 T: karasho))
alright
- 47 T: I cannot talk though
- 48 T: only type
- 49 T: lol
- 50 N: did you get the question?
- 51 T: da
yes
- 52 T: you asked if i wanted to learn Russian
- 53 T: right now
- 54 N: but you also can understand it in different way
- 55 T: ?
- 56 N: **сейчас** can also mean nowadays
- 57 T: oo
- 58 N: so it means not exactly at the moment but in nowadays
- 59 N: smth like that)
- 60 T: I barley have time these days
- 61 T: (((
- 62 T: You have to help me when I have the time
- 63 N: хорошо, только попроси)))))) ;)
 chorosho, tol'ko poprosi)))))) ;)
alright, just ask)))))) ;)
- 64 T: ok
- 65 T: How can I say "see you later"
- 66 N: увидимся)
 uvidimsya)
- 67 N: или
 ili
- 68 *or*
- 69 N: до встречи)
 do vstrechi)

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback of this excerpt, which mainly deals with a misunderstanding related to the Russian word “сейчас”:

Table 4.18 Peer feedback in excerpt 2.6

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|--|---|
| Lexical | “сейчас” standing both for “now” and “nowadays” “Uvidimsya” and “do vstrechi” standing for “see you later” |
| Exposed correction (by Nastya as a NS) | “but you also can understand it in different way (...) сейчас can also mean nowadays” (turns 54-56) |
| Other-correction (by Nastya as a NS) | turns 54-56 |
| Comprehension check (by Nastya as a NS) | “did you get the question?” |
| Clarification request (by Tom as a NNS) | ? (turn 55) |

The trouble source of this extract from Nastya’s online conversations is the Russian word *сейчас* (сейчас), which commonly means “now” but that can also mean “nowadays”. This word is interpreted in different ways by the learner and the NS and originates a misunderstanding. In turn 45, Nastya asks Tom if he is learning Russian by meaning with *сейчас* “at the moment”, “in this period”. Tom misinterprets the generic sense of the question and he assumes that Nastya is asking him whether he wants to practice his Russian in that specific moment. Therefore, he completes the adjacency pair in an unexpected way (turns 46-47-48-49). In doing so, Tom timidly attempts creating opportunities to use the TL by replying Nastya’s question in Russian. However, he immediately reselects English as a language of conversation, given his limited Russian skills.

In turn 50, Nastya starts a confirmation check sequence in Tom’s native language to which Tom replies in Russian (51). This is a clear index of his preference for the TL. However, in turns 52 and 53, Tom reselects English as alternation code in order to solve the confirmation check’s trajectory launched by Nastya. In the following turns (56-59), Nastya negotiates the meaning of her question in turn 45 by clarifying the double sense of the word *сейчас*. Hence, the initial conversational trajectory is retrieved and, in turns 60-63, Tom replies Nastya’s initial question. Despite Tom’s temporary refusal to practise Russian, Nastya offers his interlocutor the opportunity to use Russian (turn 63), since she deliberately decides to reply in Russian. Tom seems to understand and accept his partner’s stimulus (turn 64) and launches a repair trajectory with the aim to end the con-

versation with his interlocutor in the TL (turn 65) to which (turns 66-69), Nastya provides assistance.

As these conversations between Nastya and Tom prove, the number of turns in English (62 turns) are significantly larger than those in Russian (7 turns), which means that English is the common language of interaction. This forms a contrast in the symmetrical pattern of interactions in their language partnership. Auer (1995) explains that through preference-related code selection, the learner is able to avoid using the language in which he feels not confident and can decide to adopt the language in which he feels more secure because of his higher level of proficiency. This is what occurs in Nastya and Tom's case. However, in turns 46 and 51, Tom selects the L2, which can be interpreted as a sign of Tom's preference for Russian (Auer, 1988). To this regard, I argue that case study 2, Nastya, as a NS of Russian, plays an important role in making the interaction more dynamic, in mediating the on-going interaction and in collaborating in Tom's development of his TL's skills. It is probable that, thanks to Nastya, Tom's interest towards Russian slightly increased.

4.4. Case 3 – Learner Jelena

Jelena is representative of learner profile 3, the social course taker, who has a strong social networking attitude and, at the same time, makes a wide use of the didactic tools and activities of the communities. In fact, she has constantly and largely explored the platforms; she signs up daily and has a strong social networking attitude for friendship and learning. Beyond being an active user of both *Livemocha* and *Busuu*, she also makes use of *ICQ* (<http://www.icq.com/>), *MSN*, *Skype* and *Facebook* to cultivate her large network of language contacts (approximately 100) from all over the world, especially from Italy and Latin America.

4.4.1. Linguistic background

Case study 3, Jelena, is a sociable Serbian student of 24 years old with considerable experience studying languages. She attended the Cervantes Institute in her home city to study Spanish and she studied Russian in school. Her TLs are English, Russian, Spanish and Italian and, in particular, she is a highly motivated learner of these last two languages. Jelena is studying Spanish and Italian as FLs since she has never lived in the countries where these languages are spoken.

The first cycle of interview of Jelena occurred in March 2012, while the second cycle occurred 6 months later, in October 2012. For case study 3, it is possible to claim that her engagement to the communities kept constant over time, which is a contradictory data if compared to the other case studies, to the other interviewees and to what previous literature found. In the online platforms, she has completed both the Spanish and the Italian courses. Moreover, she reported having taken the Italian course twice in order to enrich her vocabulary and to revise and correct her previous mistakes. She also was able to “afford” more advanced courses by means of the virtual coin the communities allow learners to gain according to the intensiveness of their engagement to the platform.

During the interview, she proved to have fully explored the communities’ resources, to be highly aware of their potential and to be digitally skilled. She acknowledged that the online communities are just a valuable support to her language learning but not the only means to improve it and that she, autonomously, needed to empower her skills by any other means: *it’s clear that Livemocha is not enough to learn languages, you need to talk with the people, you have to look for music, movies and things like that. You have to make efforts to understand as much as possible.*

With regard to her modalities of interaction and types of channels, Jelena reported having moved out of the platforms for videocalls and chats. She claimed that she was aware of the fact that *Livemocha’s* video chat tool is not widely known among the learners of the community, which confirms the results of the survey and of the interviews (see chapter 3). She also perceived *Skype* and *MSN* as systems provided with better functionalities in terms of quality and practicality of the videocall and text chat. This trend is constant in the survey, in the interviews and in the case studies’ interviews. These online communities are meeting spaces from where learners draw for networking and for starting social and language learning relationship. However, when they strengthen these weak ties, they consequently move out of these platforms to develop their language partnership in more flexible and technically comfortable spaces. Therefore, her interactions occurred mainly by textual and video chat, although the online excerpts she provided me with only include text chat interactions.

4.4.2. *Language use patterns and opportunities*

Case study 3 achieved a very good level of Spanish and Italian because she is highly motivated and autonomous and she is keen to engage in online interactions with the members of her social networks, while her interlocutors, according to what she reported during her interview, claimed to enjoy interacting with her and appreciate the usefulness of her corrections. These corrections regard both the online submissions on the online communities and the online interactions on chat that she has with her language partners.

A salient feature regarding this case study and that emerged in the course of her interview is related to her criticism towards other learners. She reported having been disappointed by many learners who were not able to provide full language assistance and whose feedback to the online submissions was given in a very superficial way *for the sake of doing it*, without taking into considerations their partners' needs. This is an important issue that is tightly related to the principle of reciprocity, which is at the basis of tandem language learning. When she was asked to describe her experience with the online chat, she answered: *usually, they [learners] send me friend requests and, after some corrections, if they see that I speak the language well and that I explain things well, they keep sending me chat requests so that I can continue to help them. There's no rule. But, first, you need to learn a lot, a lot, you need to offer your help so that everybody can see that you are open, friendly, and quite sociable and can help others.* In other words, she makes efforts to offer her aid and assistance at the most of her possibilities. She reported that she demands and expect the same in exchange from her peers and for considering the language partnership successful.

In the interview, Jelena mentioned that revisions in the online platforms should be carried out by NSs *because they are the only ones to be able to explain it how it should be.* However, as all the extracts from the online conversations she provided me with also prove, she is at the same time an expert and a novice of English, Spanish and Italian, according to the interlocutor she is interacting with. During both the first and the second cycle of the interview, she expressed her disappointment for the low interest of language learners towards Serbian, her native language, and for the poor quality of the didactic content of the platform to treat her language, considered challenging and difficult. This is one of the reasons why case study 3 is used to share her competence by employing one of her TL. Therefore, Jelena has been selected as a meaningful case study for this analysis since she is a NNS playing the role of both expert and novice of Italian as a TL. This case study is also an expert of her L1, Serbian.

With regards to the extracts she submitted, her interlocutors are contacts that she mainly intertwined in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* and the interactions occurred in *Skype*, in *MSN* and in *Facebook* textual chat. In the extracts shown in this chapter, this case study interacts with three participants: Pedro from Venezuela, Sergio from Spain and Bruno from Italy. All the participants will be presented together with the interactional episodes they are involved in.

The participants of the first excerpt presented are Jelena and Pedro. All the interactions between the two occurred in *Skype*. Pedro is from Venezuela and Jelena met him in *Livemocha*; she mainly practiced Spanish with him and, occasionally, Italian, since Pedro's TL in *Livemocha* is Italian. With Pedro, Jelena intertwined both a language partnership relationship and a virtual friendship. With reference to her online conversations with Pedro, Jelena reported that not only did they share everyday life problems related to work, friendship, etc., but also the tandem partnership was productive under the learning point of view. She fully accepted Pedro's correction in Spanish because she valued these repairs as an opportunity to learn. In the recall interview that I conducted, she reported that she was satisfied with the level of Italian she had reached. This also occurred thanks to the language practice with Pedro. She mentioned that Pedro, whom she considered a more proficient learner of Italian, was surprised when he witnessed her language progress in the TL and he remarked that she was able to speak the language fluently. However, contrarily to what one might expect, in the next excerpt, Jelena takes the role of expert of their common TL (Italian) and starts correcting her language partner while, her language partner does not repair a mistake that she produces in the TL.

In this excerpt submitted by case study 3, it is possible to analyse a conversation between two NNSs of Italian, Jelena and Pedro, where there are several repair sequences and a not corrected utterance.

Excerpt 3.1

- 1 P: ti fa male quel dente che devi riparare?
 Is that tooth that you have to repair hurting?
- 2 P: ma devi riparare tante denti [Intended: "tanti"]

- but you have to repair many teeth*
- 3 P: tante
many
- 4 J: no, non mi fa male ma il dentista mi ha detto che dovrebbe ripararlo più presto possibile
no, it's not hurting but the dentist told me that he should repair it as soon as possible
- 5 P: capito
I see
- 6 J: tantI denti
many teeth
- 7 P: hai ragione, grazie per la correzione.
you're right, thanks for the correction.
- 8 P: anch'io devo andare dal dentista
I need to go to the dentist too
- 9 P: cerco **de** andare sempre ogni sei mesi [transfer from Spanish, correct preposition "di"]
I always try to go every six months
- 10 P: per farmi vedere i miei dente [Intended: "i miei denti"]
in order to check my teeth
- 11 J: cerco DI andare
I try to go
- 12 J: **non mezcli** lo spagnolo con l'italiano [Intended: "non mischiare" or "non mescolare", wrong verb and wrong form of negative imperative]
don't mix Spanish and Italian
- 13 J: per favore
please
- 14 P: jejejejeje questo spagnolo
hebehebebe this Spanish
- 15 J: jajajajajajajaja
habahabababababa

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback for this excerpt:

Table 4.19 Peer feedback in excerpt 3.1

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|---|---|
| Morphosyntactic (by Jelena as an expert of Italian) | "Tente denti" (turn 2) |
| | "Tante" (turn 3) |
| | "Cerco de andare" (turn 9) |
| Affective (by Jelena as an expert of Italian) | "non mezcli lo spagnolo con l'italiano" (turn 12) |
| Exposed (by Jelena as an expert of Italian) | "tantI denti" (turn 6) |

| | |
|--|--|
| | “cerco DI andare” (turn 11) |
| Self-correction (by Pedro as a novice of Italian) | (turns 2-3) |
| Other-correction (by Jelena as an expert of Italian) | “tantI denti” (turn 6) “cerco DI andare” (turn 11) “non mezcli lo spagnolo con l'italiano” (turn 12) |

In turn 1, Pedro follows the social trajectory that he and Jelena had previously launched and, in turn 2, he casts a grammatically incorrect utterance that also contains a typographical error (“tente” instead of “tante”). In turn 3, Pedro self-repairs his typographical error but he does not correct the grammar mistake, that is, the wrong agreement between the plural form of the noun “denti” with the plural form of its correspondent adjective “tanti”. Jelena completes Pedro initial adjacency pairs by replying his question and without interrupting the social trajectory (turn 4) and Pedro shows his satisfaction with Jelena’s answer (turn 5). In turn 6, Jelena recognizes the mistake produced by her peer and starts pedagogical repair by emphasizing the error through the use of the capital letter. Pedro (turn 7) seems to notice and acknowledge Jelena’s corrective feedback judging from his utterance that also expresses gratitude towards his partner. In turn 8, Pedro reactivates the social trajectory but he produces another incorrect utterance due to his interlanguage development and to the interference of his native language (Spanish) with the TL (Italian). In turn 10, he does not self-repair his previous utterance and produces another incorrect agreement between the plural form of the possessive adjective “miei” and the singular form of the noun (“dente” instead of “denti”). Jelena repairs the mistake of turn 8 (turn 11) interrupting the social trajectory a second time strongly commenting about her partner’s problem (turn 12). In doing so, she makes use of a negative imperative to instruct her partner not to mix his L1 and L2 but, inadvertently, she enacts a similar incorrect behaviour. In fact, she adopts the Spanish verb “mezclar” (“to mix”, the negative imperative of the second singular person of “mezclar” in Spanish is “no mezcles”, created by the negation “no” + the subjunctive form of the verb conjugated with the second singular person) instead of the Italian terms “mischiare” or “mescolare” and she conjugates the Spanish verb according to the Italian form of the second singular person of the indicative. Instead, in Italian, the negative imperative form of the second singular person is created by the negation “non” + the infinitive of the verb (“non mischiare” or “non mescolare”). Therefore, her mistake is not only lexical but also grammatical. Being both Jelena and Pedro NNSs of Italian, neither of the interactants noticed this incorrect utterance and it remains unsolved. In fact, in the following turns (turns 14

and 15) both the learners co-collaborate to mitigate Pedro's previous errors (turn 9) and the explicit (and potentially somewhat face-threatening) correction of his partner (turn 12). Another interpretation could be that Pedro realised that she produced a non target-like utterance but, not being able to repair it, he preferred to go on with the social trajectory without breaking the conversation flow.

Another aspect to remark, which is directly related to this and to the following conversational episodes, is that the NNSs are not always able to notice their own mistakes, as it probably occurred in the case of "non mezcli". The following excerpt is another example of this aspect. The two interactants are Jelena and Pedro, they are talking in their TL (Italian) and Pedro is giving Jelena affective feedback about her language performance in Spanish, Jelena's main TL.

Excerpt 3.2

- 28 P: cuando parlo con te sento che sto parlando con una ragazza di madre lingua
[intended "di madrelingua"] spagnola
When I talk with you, I feel as if I'm talking with a Spanish native speaker
- 29 J: Quando parlo con te deLLA MADRELINGUA
When I talk with younative speaker
- 30 J: non si separano "madre" e "lingua"
you don't separate "madre" and "lingua"
- 31 J: *separanno [intended "separano"]
**separate*
- 32 P: mamma mia hai ragione
my goodness you're right
- 33 P: cosa pensavo
what was I thinking about
- 34 J: hahahahhahahahahahaha
hahahabbahabababababa
- 35 P: ragazza della madrelingua spagnola
Spanish native speaker girl

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback for this excerpt:

Table 4.20 Peer feedback in excerpt 3.2

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|--|--|
| Morphosyntactic (by Jelena as an expert of Italian) | madre lingua/madrelingua (turns 28-29) |

| | |
|---|--|
| Affective (by Jelena as an expert of Italian) | non si separano "madre" e "lingua" (turn 30) |
| Exposed (by Jelena as an expert of Italian) | Turns 29-30 |
| Self-correction (by Jelena as an expert of Italian) | Turn 31 |
| Other-correction (by Jelena as an expert of Italian) | Turns 29-30 |

In turn 28, Pedro is praising Jelena for being a proficient learner of Spanish and, in turn 29, Jelena starts a repair sequence recasting “madrelingua” as a single word. Her strategy to emphasise the repair is the use of capital letters and the repair is followed by affective feedback in the following line (turn 30). However, Jelena’s repair in turn 29 is not entirely correct; the Italian prepositional article “della” in this context is not acceptable and should be replaced by the simple preposition “di”. Therefore Pedro used the preposition correctly in turn 28. In addition, in turn 31, Jelena repairs her previous utterance, which was correct, in a wrong way (she marks her self-correction by means of an asterisk). Being a NNS of Italian, Pedro seems not to have any objections to Jelena’s corrections and self-corrections and he starts a metalanguage sequence to mitigate his mistake and to re-establish the social trajectory (turns 32-33). His language partner contributes to the mitigation sequence (turn 34) and then, in turn 35, Pedro recasts the same utterance as provided by Jelena, which was not completely correct. In all likelihood, Pedro did not realize that “della” and “separanno” are mistakes because his level of the TL did not allow him to do it. This conversation shows that, despite the beneficial effects of such language partnership, when both learners are NNSs of the TL, some problems might arise and remain unsolved.

The following online interaction occurred in *MSN* between Jelena and Sergio, a NS of Spanish. Sergio’s TL is English and, according to him, his writing skills are intermediate but his spoken skills are very basic. Therefore he inhabits the communities (both *Busuu* and *Livemocha* as Jelena) because he needs to improve his speaking skills. Sergio belongs to the 45 interviewees of the interview phase and to learner profile 2, the social networker. For this reason, more information is available about this language partner. When Sergio was interviewed, he expressed his preference for *Busuu* because he found that the search option was user-friendly and allowed him to find contacts easily. In addition, he reported that he preferred *Busuu* platform because it was faster than *Livemocha* and that this was an important factor given that he had frequent problems with a slow connection

at home. However, he found the language partner search function of *Livemocha* more user-friendly than the one in *Busuu*. He did not make use of the didactic resources of the platforms because he preferred to rely on his own resources and because he did not trust on the peer feedback received on *Livemocha* and *Busuu* platforms. He also reported that it was very hard for him to find NSs of English to chat with in his TL and that his L1 was a means to add more language partners. This occurred for two main reasons: (1) he was able to express concepts more fluently in his L1 (2) and he could not find many NSs of English in the online platforms. The result was that he sometimes employed his TL to interact with NNSs of English and his L1 to interact with NNSs of Spanish. In his accounts, he mentioned that he tended to send friend requests following two main criteria, the knowledge of English of his language partners and their self-disclosure through their profile view, which had to convey an idea of seriousness (he was very sensitive to hoaxing and cyberflirting and did not appreciate them). Given his technical problem with the Internet, he preferred the textual chats of *Skype*, *Facebook* and *MSN*. When Sergio was instructed on how to send me his online interactions, he reported his difficulties at finding adequate language partners on the online platforms and at finding good topics for the conversation. At the time of the first cycle of interview, he had already met Jelena in *Busuu* and it was Jelena who provided me with the online interaction between them. The interaction occurred between the first and the second cycle of interview. When Sergio was interviewed again, his commitment to the platforms had decreased. He had discovered *Interpals* (<http://www.interpals.net/>). *Interpals* belongs to category C, “language exchange community without didactic materials” (see 3.1.1). In this community, Sergio found that it was easier to find NSs of English because, according to him, the users of *Livemocha* and *Busuu* are more oriented towards the didactic resources of the platform than to the social ones, instead in *Interpals* all users share the same objective of socializing in one’s TL. He also reported that his spoken skills through SCMC had improved.

With regard to the following conversation between Sergio and Jelena, which occurred in *MSN*, it is necessary to say that, because of Sergio’s slow connection, the responses between each turn are delayed (approximately 3-minute delay from one turn to the other). As both of them underlined in the recall interviews, this aspect hindered the flow of this conversation and the future partnership between the two interactants. As both of them reported, they did not have the chance to talk frequently because the slow connection was experienced as an obstacle and as a demotivating factor for their learning.

Excerpt 3.3

- 50 J: hoy estudiaba el italiano
today I was studying Italian
- 51 S: pues yo me acabé de leer un libro para aprender inglés de forma rápida [intended: rápida]
well I've finished a book for learning English quickly
- 52 J: ¿Qué libro?
What book?
- 53 S: aprende o mejorar el inglés
learn or improve your English
- 54 S: creo que se llama
I think this is the name
- 55 S: *aprende o mejora el inglés
**learn or improve your English*
- 56 J: etiendo [intended "entiendo"]
I see
- 57 J: bueno...mira eso...<http://www.aulafacil.com/>
well...look at this...http://www.aulafacil.com/
- 58 J: tiene las explicaciones en español
there are the explanations in Spanish
- 59 J: para muchos idiomas
for many languages
- 60 S: gracias Jelena pero internet ya me va mal y no puedo verla
thanks Jelena but the connection is not good and I can't see it
- 61 S: tengo libros con gramática [gramática] básica [básica] de alemán [alemán] , frances [francés], ruso e inglés
I have books with basic grammar
- 62 S: *explicaciones
**explanations*
- 63 J: ruso [Intended "ruso"] también...vaya vaya vaya...
Russian too...oh wow...
- 64 J: pero que inteligente eres tú
you're so smart
- 65 S: eran baratos
they were cheap

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback for this excerpt:

| Table 4.21 Peer feedback in excerpt 3.3 | |
|---|---------|
| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |

| | |
|---|---|
| Phonological (by Sergio as an expert of Spanish) | explicaciones (turn 58) *explicaciones (turn 62) |
| Exposed | Turn 62 |
| Self-correction | Turn 55 |
| Other-correction | Turn 62 |

In turns 50-55, the participants are reflecting on their language learning activities and sharing knowledge on their personal learning resources available outside of Busuu and Livemocha platforms. In turn 53, Sergio is sharing with Jelena the name of the book that he has read to improve his TL and he recasts its name in turn 55. Jelena accepts the recast (turn 56) and also shares a link that is useful for the language progress of both of them (turn 57). In turns 58 and 59, Jelena provides further information about the Internet resource that she has just shared and she misspells the word “explicaciones” (turn 58). In turn 60, Sergio manifests his slow connection problem that was reported by both the participants during the interview. In turn 61, he continues the social trajectory about his language learning resources and makes several mistakes by not stressing the syllables. Spelling inaccuracies are typical of online chats and in this specific case are not due to Sergio’s lack of knowledge of his L1 but to the informal characteristics of the internet talk and to the immediacy of the medium (Cárdenas-Claros & Isharyanti, 2009; Crystal, 2006; Danet & Herring, 2007). In the case of this informal conversation, these inaccuracies should not be misleading for Jelena as she is not a novice to Spanish. In turn 62, despite the slow Internet connection and thanks to the visual saliency of the SCMC, Sergio is able to detect Jelena’s mistake in turn 58 and to recast the correct form. But Jelena, who in all likelihood does not notice the correction (maybe because distracted by the delay between each turn), follows the social trajectory (turns 63-64) and produces another incorrect utterance in turn 63. The misspelled word “russo” in this turn is probably due the interference of Italian, the other TL Jelena is learning. But Sergio seems not to notice it and goes on with the social trajectory (turn 65).

The language partnership between Sergio and Jelena, as she recalled, was not as productive as others mainly because of Sergio’s technical constraints, which prevented them from creating opportunities for peer feedback and for improvements. Another reason why this partnership was not so intensive was that Sergio, as he recalled during the interview, was seeking a NS of English as a language partner and Jelena, despite her high

English proficiency was not a NS. Therefore, the conversations between both of them occurred mainly in Spanish, given Sergio's limited knowledge of Serbian and his unwillingness to practice his English with a NNS. Interpreting their partnership under the framework of AT, it is possible to claim that there are conflicting goals at stake and that the labour between the two interactants cannot be equally shared.

The following tandem partnership is between Jelena and an Italian language partner she met in Livemocha, Bruno, who is a learner of Serbian (basic level). The interactions between Jelena and Bruno occurred mainly in the Facebook chat. The following excerpt is the first part of a long conversation between the two interactants in Facebook.

Excerpt 3.4

- 80 J: Ciao Bruno...come stai? Cosa hai fatto in questi giorni?
Hi Bruno... how are you? What did you do in these last days?
- 81 B: Ciao Jelena, io sto bene grazie... in questi giorni ho lavorato molto...
Hi Jelena, I'm fine, thanks...I've been working hard in these days...
- 82 J: solo hai lavorato? Non sei uscito o qualcosa così?
Have you just worked? Haven't you gone out or anything like that?
- 83 B: si certo... esco con la mia ragazza e facciamo insieme delle passeggiate e andiamo in giro nei locali a bere qualcosa insieme...
yes of course...I'm going out with my girlfriend, we're walking together, we're going to pubs and drinking something together
- 84 J: mmm che bello
invece [intended: invece] io studio le lingue, guardo alcuni programmi della televisione (adesso guardo "tutti pazzi per amore), cerco qualche lavoro ma non è facile e qualche volta, esco con i miei amici per andare in giro con loro e rilassarmi
*mmm cool
instead I'm studying languages, I'm watching some TV programmes (now I'm watching "tutti pazzi per amore), I'm looking for a job
but it's not easy, and sometimes I go out with my friends to relax with them*
- 85 B: alcuni... non alcuni... bravissimaaaaa!!!
sulla parola facile non si mette l'accento....
*alcuni... not alcuni... Very good!!!
You don't stress the word facile*

- 86 J: va bene... quindi... sto guardando alcuni programmi della televisione..... cerco qualche lavoro ma non è facile ma io sono sicurissima che troverò qualche lavoro verso la mia educazione delle lingue
- alright...so...I'm watching some programmes of the television.....I'm looking for some kind of job, it's not easy but I'm sure that I will find something about my language education*
- 87 B: e [intended "è"] meglio dire alcuni programmi televisivi...
o alcuni programmi in tv...
qualche lavoro attinente al mio studio delle lingue...
- I'd better say some TV programmes....
or some programmes on tv...
some job related to my language studies....*
- 88 J: Sì
- Yeab*
- 89 B: molto bene, bravissima davvero!!!
sei migliorata davvero molto.... complimenti!!!
- good job, very good, really!!!
You have really improved a lot.....*
- 90 J: grazie tante
- many thanks*
- 91 B: ma prego , cara!!!
- you're very welcome, dear!!!*

Table 4.22 Peer feedback in excerpt 3.4

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|-------------------------|--|
| Lexical | Turn 85 Alcuni/alguni Facile/facile Turn 87 |
| Affective | Turn 85 Turn 87 Turn 89 |
| Exposed | Turns 85 and 87 |
| Other-correction | Turns 85 and 87 |

In turns 80-84 Jelena and Bruno are involved in the social trajectory concerning the description of their daily activities. In turn 84, Jelena produces two spelling mistakes. Both of them (“alguni” and “fácil”) are a transfer from Spanish, the other TL in which Jelena is more proficient. The correspondent forms of the Italian “alcuni” (some) and “facile” (easy) are “algunos” and “fácil” in Spanish. These spelling mistakes are due to the similarity between Italian and Spanish for being Romance languages. In turn 85, Bruno starts

the first repair, followed by a mitigation sentence which is then followed by another repair in the form of affective feedback. In turn 86, Jelena accepts the corrections made by the NS, she recasts them correctly and proceeds adding more information about the social aspect of the conversation. In this turn, Jelena does not make mistakes. However, in turn 87, the NS recasts the learner previous' utterances in a more native-like form, offering two target-like interchangeable options (“alcuni programmi televisivi...o alcuni programmi in tv...”). The learner seems not to be hurt by the NS's tendency to correct her in a perfect way and accepts the repair (turn 88). In turn 89, Bruno shows sensitivity towards his language partner and mitigates his repairs by several words of praise in order to encourage Jelena. This generates a sequence of polite thanking formulae that express gratitude (turns 90-91).

The repair sequences between Jelena and Bruno were successful because Jelena warmly welcomed the corrections in her TL and because Bruno was able to play his role of expert of Italian properly. In the excerpt analysed, the goals between the two interactants are not in conflict. Jelena's goal is to improve her Italian as much as possible and Bruno's goal is to help her achieve better results. In addition, both of them are pursuing the social trajectory and telling each other about their social and learning lives. However, as the excerpts about the way they negotiate the language will show (see section 4.4.3), their learning goals can produce contradictions in terms of reciprocity of the interaction.

4.4.3. *Language selection and its negotiation*

The following excerpts will illustrate how language selection is negotiated in the language partnership between Jelena and Bruno. During their interactions, Jelena created opportunities to use her TL by speaking mainly in Italian and Bruno, who was supposed to do the same in Serbian, did not achieve the same results. Excerpt 3.5 is the continuation of excerpt 3.4.

Excerpt 3.5

- 92 J: diciamo che ho trovato alcuni indirizzi di web dove tutto è scritto in spagnolo (ho trovato anche tutti i tempi)
e quindi io imparo piano piano
e certo...provo sempre di guardare qualcosa in italiano per migliorare il mio vocabolario
*let's say that I've found some webpages where everything is written in Spanish
(I have found all the verb tenses)*

*so step by step I'm learning
and of course...I always try to look at some pages in Italian to improve my vocabulary*

- 93 B: indirizzi web...
provo sempre a guardare....
*webpages...
I always try to look at.....*
- 94 J: ho trovato alcuni indirizzi web dove tutto è scritto in spagnolo e certo provo sempre a guardare qualcosa in italiano
davvero
I've found some webpages where everything is written in Spanish and of course I always try to look at something in Italian really
- 95 B: e naturalmente cerco sempre di cercare qualcosa in lingua italiana...

and of course I always try to look for something in Italian language...
- 96 B: bene bene brava....

very good, good job....
- 97 J: grazie [grazie] invecce [intended: invece] a te...comi ti vanno gli studi (la lingua Serba) grazie

thanks, instead what about your studies (Serbian language) thanks
- 97 B: ma piano piano imparo qualcosa in più....
al' to mi je tesko!!

*well slowly I'l learning a little more....
but this is difficult for me!!*
- 98 J: ho capito che è difficile ma non è impossibile
e questo è importantissimo
*I can understand it's difficult, but it's not impossible
and this is very important*
- 99 B: Da, naravno!!

Yes, of course!!
- 100 J: diciamo che sono fortunata perchè l'italiano è troppo simile con lo spagnolo ci sono alcune cose diverse ma sono sicura che ho intenzione di imparare tutto più presto possibile
let's say that I'm lucky because Italian is very similar with Spanish, there are some things that are different but I'm sure that I'm going to learn everything as soon as possible
- 101 B: è molto simile allo spagnolo...
sono sicura che imparerò tutto il più presto possibile....
*it's very similar to Spanish...
I'm sure that I'll learn everything as soon as possible....*
- 102 J: perchè non è giusto dire "e sono sicura che ho intenzione di imparare tutto...?"

- why is it not correct to say "and I'm sure I'm going to learn everything...?"*
- 103 B: puoi dire: ho intenzione di imparare tutto...
 ma è meglio dire: sono sicura che imparerò tutto...
 perché è scontato che tu abbia l'intenzione...
*you can say: I'm going to learn everything...
 but you'd better say: I'm sure that I will learn everything...
 because it's clear that you have the intention of doing it*
- 104 J: ho capito

I understand
- 105 B: brava...

good...

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback for this excerpt:

Table 4.23 Peer feedback in excerpt 3.5

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|--|---|
| Morphosyntactic | Indirizzi web (turn 93) Provo sempre a guardare (turn 93) Turn 95 Turn 101 |
| (by Bruno as an expert of Italian) | |
| Affective | Turns 96, 103, 105 |
| (by Bruno as an expert of Italian) | |
| Exposed | Turns 93, 95 and 101 |
| (by Jelena as an expert of Italian) | |
| Self-correction | Turn 97 (grazie) |
| (by Jelena as a novice of Italian) | |
| Other-correction | Turns 93, 95 and 101 |
| (by Bruno as an expert of Italian) | |
| Clarification request | Turn 102 |

In turn 92, Jelena is explaining to her language partner how she is progressing with her TL through the learning resources she was able to find on the web. In this turn, she types the Italian preposition “di” twice where it is not necessary. In the subsequent turn (93), the NS starts a repair sequence eliminating “di” in the utterance “indirizzi web” and replacing “di” by “a” after the Italian verb “guardare”. The learner recasts correctly in turn 94 and tries to restore the social trajectory by the word “davvero” (really). In turn 95, the NS prefers to launch the learning trajectory a new time providing a better version of his own recast. Then he praises the learner (turn 96) probably with the aim to mitigate

his corrections. Jelena closes the thanking sequence and launches the social trajectory a new time (turn 97). Then Bruno is offered the opportunity to answer and to continue using his own TL in turn 98. Jelena, as an expert of Serbian, encourages her partner through metalanguage talk but she does not help him actively, because she keeps selecting her own TL. If she had selected her L1, she would have created more opportunities for Bruno to practice and to benefit from the language partnership. In turn 99, Bruno insists and does not switch to his L1, which might be interpreted as a further attempt to improve his TL. In both turns 97 and 99, Bruno operates a participant-related code-switching (Auer, 1988), which means that he is declaring his preference for the Serbian code and that he is trying to construct opportunities for language learning. However, Jelena pursues her own social and learning goals, as turn 100 clearly illustrates. She does not switch to her L1 for her partner and she adopts her own TL to start another metalanguage talk related to her own progress. In turn 101, Bruno seems to surrender to his role of expert of Italian as he reselects his L1 to correct his partner. An interpretation is that in turn 101 he operates a discourse-related code-switching to organize the ongoing interaction and restore his role of expert of Italian. Another possible interpretation is that this switch signals Bruno's preference (participant-related code-switching) for his L1. This might be due the fact that he is emotionally affected by Jelena not switching to Serbian or it might be due to his fear to be corrected since he is aware of his low proficiency in the TL. Auer (1995) explains this by suggesting that the speaker feels insecure and chooses the language in which he is more competent, avoiding the TL. In turn 102, a clarification request sequence is launched by the learner of Italian, the NS solves it (103), the learner accepts the clarification (104) and the NS provides an encouraging affective feedback (105).

During the recall interview, Jelena mentioned that she and Bruno did not explicitly divide their labour by assigning their language preference code and the role of expert and novice of the TL, which is a crucial aspect at the basis of the success of a language partnership. This did not occur due to Bruno's low proficiency of Serbian, as Jelena recalled. Therefore, an agreement did not take place and their interactions occurred mainly in Italian language. According to AT, it is possible to claim that, in this extract, Jelena and Bruno are engaged in two main activities, language learning and metalanguage talk. This excerpt has also illustrated that the division of labour between Bruno and Jelena did not

prove to work out properly if there are contradictions between goals, that is, if the activities of metalanguage talk and language learning interfere with each other.

The following excerpt, which is a direct continuation of the previous one, will illustrate this aspect more in depth showing a similar attempt of Bruno to select his TL.

Excerpt 3.6

- 106 J: grazie caro
ma tu hai bisogno di vedre [Intended: vedere] questo...wwitv.com.
qui puoi [intended: "puoi"] trovare tutti stazioni della televisione [intended:
"tutte le stazioni televisive"]
di tutto il mondo
*thanks dear, but you need to see this...wwitv.com.
here you'll be able to find all the television stations
in the world*
- 107 B: oh grazie...
oh thanks
- 108 J: anche ci sono alcuni programmi dal [intended: "del"] mio paese
prego
*di vedere
*there are also some programmes from my country
you're welcome
* di vedere*
- 109 J: posso dirti che mi piace molto il canale sette
di monopoli
mi sempra abbastanza interessante
semBra
*I can tell you that I really like channel 7
from Monopoli
It seems quite interesting
seeMs*
- 110 B: ah bene bee
bene
gledam RTV1, al' nista ne mogu da rezumem...
*ah good goo
good
I watch RTV1 but I can't understand a word...*

- 111 J: ah piano piano
con il tempo capirai [intended: “capirai”]...ma hai bisogno di vocabolario più grade [intended: “di un vocabolario più grande”]
*ah step by step
with time you'll understand....but you need to enrich your vocabulary*
- 112 J: il mio consiglio è che provi di capire [intended: “a capire”] qualcosa verso le situazioni in cui [intended: “cui”] si trova la gente e certo...ascolta con attenzione sempre
my suggestion is: try to understand something about the situations in which the people are and of course...always pay attention to what you listen to
- 113 B: grazieeeeeee
thank youuuuuuu
- 114 J: prego...
e certo...quando trovi qualcosa che non riesci a capire, scrivi le parole e fammi [intended: “fammi”] le domande
*you're welcome...
and of course...if you find something that you don't understand, write down the words and ask me*
- 115 B: grazie mille cara!!!
many thanks dear!!!

The results in the table show the characteristics of peer feedback for this excerpt:

Table 4.24 Peer feedback in excerpt 3.6

| Peer feedback and LREs | Excerpt |
|------------------------|---|
| Self-correction | Turn 108 “di vedere” (by Jelena) Turn 109 “semBra” (by Jelena) Turn 110 “bene” (by Bruno) |

In turn 106, Jelena first thanks Bruno for the words of admiration of excerpt 3.5 (turn 105) and then she shares with him a link that she finds useful for their language progress. Bruno shows gratitude for this learning sharing without repairing the mistakes in turn 106. In turn 108, Jelena provides more information about the link sent, she closes the thanking sequence (“prego”) and she self repairs (“*di vedere” as signalled by the asterisk) the misspelled utterance from the previous turn (106), which in all likelihood is due fast typing and to the features of SCMC discourse. In turn 109, she continues the social trajectory and self repairs “semBra” (as signalled by the capital letter), which might be also due to fast typing). As it is possible to notice, Bruno is not correcting Jelena as he was doing in excerpt 3.5. This might be due to the fact that Jelena has not made serious

mistakes that impede the flow of the conversation between them. Another reason could be that, since Jelena is offering to him didactic resources, Bruno is involved in his own learning trajectory and is not paying attention to the learning trajectory of his partner. In turn 110, Bruno maintains the social trajectory in his L1 and then he starts a metalanguage talk reselecting his TL in another attempt to create opportunities for language use (as signalled by the arrow). His utterance in Serbian is correct (as well as the utterances in Serbian of excerpt 3.5), but Jelena continues the metalanguage talk (turns 111-112) in Italian without providing feedback about his language performance. In turn 112, Jelena makes the same mistake of excerpt 3.5 (turn 92). In that excerpt she used the Italian verb “provare” (to try) followed by the incorrect preposition “di” instead of “a” (“provo di guardare”), she was corrected by the NS and she recast the correct utterance (turns 93-94). In this excerpt from the same conversation, she makes the same mistake (“provi di capire” instead of “provi a capire”), which means that intake did not occur and the NS does not repair her. In all likelihood, the lack of repair is due to the fact that Jelena and Bruno have implicitly switched their roles. Jelena has taken the role of expert of her L1 and Bruno the role of novice of Serbian. Therefore, Jelena is involved in a metalanguage talk that aims to guide Bruno with his language progress. Bruno accepts her suggestions with gratitude (turn 113) and Jelena invites her language partner to ask for assistance (turn 114), which gives rise to another thanking sequence (turn 115).

Under the lens of AT, it is possible to interpret excerpts 3.5 and 3.6 in such a way: the two language partners are driven by the same motives of improving their TL and metalanguage talk about their respective TLs. However, they have not defined the division of their labour assigning roles to each other. This socializing activity between Bruno and Jelena is driven by motives that include the nourishment of their interpersonal relationship, cross-cultural communication and the improvement of their respective TLs. Here I wish to argue that these two different activities, language learning and metalanguage talk, seem to be in contradiction in this specific context and that they do not appear compatible (Engeström, 2001). The influence of this contradiction shapes the interactants’ goals, their language selection and the exchange they have in these sequences.

As evidenced in these extracts, Bruno appears to attempt to maintain the goal to use his TL over the course of the conversation. It is possible to speculate that the reason for the temporariness of his goal to use Serbian is that if he persists in focusing only on this

goal, that is, in defining his interaction with Jelena primarily as an opportunity to practice his Serbian, his goal to socialize and to reflect on his TL and on Jelena's TL would be undermined. This can be analysed as a contradiction between Bruno's two motives. Bruno appears more in difficulty pursuing his two goals at the same time. It may be argued that he is making a choice between these two contradicting goals by temporarily giving up the goal to improve his Serbian, also because he is not fully encouraged by his language partner. On the other hand, Jelena's goal is the learning trajectory for her TL and the social trajectory with her partner.

About the tandem partnership between Jelena and Bruno, it is also important to underline that their frequent adoption of exclamations such as “cara!!!” (turns 106 and 115) and “grazieeeee” (turn 113) represent a strategic way to contribute to the social trajectory between them and to show affection and closeness.

4.5. Discussion

This chapter has taken into consideration different learners, with different backgrounds and in different interactional episodes.

Learner- NS conversations

William (case study 1) NS: English, TL: Spanish

Partners: Pilar and Marisol, NSs: Spanish, TL: English

Nastya (case study 2) NS: Russian, TL: English

Partner: Tom, NS: English, TL: Russian

Jelena (case study 3), NS: Serbian, TL: Italian

Partner: Bruno, NS: Italian, TL: Serbian

Jelena (case study 3), NS: Serbian, TL: Spanish

Partner: Sergio, NS: Spanish, TL: English

Learner- NNS conversations

Jelena (case study 3), NS: Serbian, TL: Italian and Spanish

Partner: Pedro, NS: Spanish, TL: Italian

Learners' textual conversations

Nastya (case study 2) with Tom.

Jelena (case study 3) with Pedro.

Jelena (case study 3) with Sergio

Jelena (case study 3) with Bruno

Learners' spoken conversations

William (case study 1) with Pilar and Marisol.

The interactional episodes occurred both in a textual chat, which has quasi-synchronous features resembling oral conversations, and in *Skype* audio call.

As this chapter has shown, in the informal conversations generated through the online communities, conversational events like non-understanding, assistance seeking and assistance provision are spontaneously generated by learners in the interactions with their peers rather than being pedagogically triggered by a teacher. This chapter confirms what previous studies have already outlined (Pasfield-Neofitou 2007a, 2007b, 2009; Tudini, 2010), that online chat interactions have a potential for SLA. This study is a further confirmation that in naturalistic and uncontrolled conversational settings there is less frequency of corrective feedback in comparison with a classroom and pedagogical tasks.

The study shows the presence of morphosyntactic feedback in the interactions of case study 3 (Jelena). Previous studies (Lai & Zhao, 2006) also stressed that the majority of recasts in online chats regard morphosyntactic items because of the visual saliency of the textual chat, which favours noticing. Instead, recasts in oral conversations would mainly regard lexical items (Lai & Zhao, 2006). However, other studies (Smith, 2005; Sauro & Smith, 2010) by analyzing synchronous chat transcripts concluded that time and visual saliency favoured learners' uptake of new lexical items. This is the case of Nastya (case study 2). Her conversations occurred synchronously in the textual chat and were predominated by the acquisition of new vocabulary and lexical problems concerning semantics. The presence of repair sequences correlated to morphosyntactic items in the interactions of case study 3 can be attributed to their corrective attitude and to the asymmetric relationship between her and her partner. Instead, in the case of William (case study 1), whose interactions occurred through voiced chat, it is possible to notice the presence of

phonological repairs together with lexical repair. This is consistent with previous literature (Jepson, 2005; Sauro, 2001), which found a significant high number of phonological repairs due to pronunciation issues. In the corpus data of this thesis there is little evidence of embedded repair and a high predominance of exposed correction, which is considered as an unpreferred act in online conversations (Tudini, 2010). Embedded repair is more difficult to achieve and it is a sign of maturity and great sensitivity of learners, instead exposed repair interrupts the intersubjectivity between the interlocutors and it is considered more intrusive. However, it is also important to underline that the high presence of exposed corrections can be justified by the fact that all the partners in these dyadic conversations had agreed on their roles of expert and novice of the conversations and that both of them expected corrections by their peers.

In the corpus data there is more frequency of confirmation checks and clarification requests. In contrast, comprehension checks are the least frequent forms of negotiation of meaning in the interactions. Previous studies found that comprehension checks occur more frequently than other negotiating questions in L2 classroom contexts because of the presence of the teacher. In contrast, confirmation checks and clarification requests are more common in dyadic NS-NNS conversations or dyadic novice-expert conversations (Pica & Long, 1986). Therefore, this study is in line with previous research. This study also confirms that clarification requests are the most prominent negotiating questions in both textual and voiced chat (Jepson, 2005), a finding that matches with research in face-to-face conversations between NSs and NNSs (Jepson, 2005; Long & Sato, 1983). In the data, other-correction episodes are mainly related to morphosyntactic and lexical mistakes, instead self-correction episodes are related to phonological mistakes in the case of voiced chat and to spelling mistakes in the case of textual chat. In addition, a few episodes of continuers and co-construction were found, which in sociocultural terms indicates that learners were oriented towards the creation of the ZPD. This analysis in general shows that learners pool their resources to foster their partners' language development during their informal interactions.

Drawing on sociocultural theory, the scaffolding occurring between learners and more capable peers plays a crucial role during the learning process because it allows learners to enable their problem-solving skills while collaborating with their peers in the TL (Ohta,

1995). In this corpus data there is evidence of peer scaffolding in presence of positive resolutions of complex communication problems mainly originated by:

- Unknown word sequences: learners signal a polite request of assistance
- Correction sequences: learners correct their partners and these sequences prove to be usually successful when the two partners have agreed on their roles of “expert” and “novice” of the interaction.

An important feature of the data is the presence of dialogues focused on the establishment of polite strategies to maintain social cohesion and to strengthen the interpersonal relationships among interactants. Research on CMC in L2 learning conducted under a sociocultural framework (Darhower, 2002; Gonzales, 2012; Peterson 2012) confirms that the social cohesion that learners establish among them in a community is at the basis of the language learning process. Previous research (Peterson, 2012) outlined that these polite strategies involve greetings and leave takings and that learners devote considerable amount of time to both. The data here present the same evidence and confirms the idea that these formulae help learners cement their relationships, build rapport, become more familiar with each other and share a common identity and a sense of belonging to the community of learners at large independently of where the interaction occurs within the community itself (*Livemocha* or *Busuu*) or on a voiced call system such a *Skype* or *MSN*. This sense of affiliation is further confirmed by the use of humour (signalled in particular by acronyms, abbreviations and emoticons) and by colloquial expressions. The data of this study provide evidence of sense of affiliation. Moreover, interview transcriptions further confirmed that these polite strategies reduced the distance between interlocutors and contributed to the creation of supportive social relationships. Further research should add more insights related to typical aspects of the online discourse such as acronyms, abbreviations, emoticons and onomatopoeic expressions that show learners’ proficiency in the pragmatics of the TL, which is a gap to fill in the context of online communities (Gruba & Clark, 2013). Similarly, research should shed more light on the role played by backchannels and empathy markers with regard to learners inhabiting online communities because these are strategies to maintain the social and the learning trajectories.

In addition, even though the researcher was not monitoring the interactional episodes, which makes these interactions particularly insightful to understand the dynamics of SCMC in out of class spontaneous settings, it is possible to confirm that learners were able to manage both the social and the learning trajectory and generally able to start parallel actions, such as conversation with the tandem partner and digital tool usage (e.g. online dictionary) in order to facilitate the conversation. It is also necessary to underline that none of these artifacts corresponded to the tools embedded in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* platforms. These learners had already found other reliable translation tools in the social web, which is a sign of digital literacy and critical thinking skills.

From the analysis of learners' informal online interactions, it also came forward that learners' sense of identity carries important implications on the way they approach the practice of the TL (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995). Each learner has his own story and has invested in his L2. Each one of them bears his/her own expectations that might include cultural enrichment, success and sense of completeness as an individual (Kurata, 2011). Learners' identity and investment in the L2 contribute to define their social roles and goals and these goals are negotiated in the interactions. It emerged that, after that learners have invested their L2 learning in either a formal or informal setting (or in both), they expect their online informal interactions to be rewarding and lead to some improvement.

The study has proved that social interactions contribute notably to define one's identity and that the exposure of one's self in the communicative online discussions and interactions are essential to L2 development (Lam, 2004; Mills, 2011; Thorne, et al., 2009). As previous examples have shown, a constructive communication in the L2 occurs effectively when students' identities are affirmed in their interpersonal space, (Cummins, 1996, 2000; Kurata, 2011) which is conceived as the space established between individuals in the social interactions. They also contributed to clarify "if and how the interpersonal space can become a negative constriction zone where learners' self-image and opportunities to use the L2, rather than being developed can be restricted" (Kurata, 2011:90-91).

This chapter has underlined the important role played by learners when they co-construct their identity, self-confidence and opportunities to interact, taking into account

that L2 identity is not fix, but variable and it is shaped, structured and negotiated during the online interactions (Cummins, 1996, 2000; Kurata, 2011). Therefore, interactants bear a huge responsibility, in the use of foreigner talk, in the provision of an adequate corrective feedback or repair negotiation, and in the choice of appropriate and consistent sub-topics in conversation. These findings confirm previous research (Kurata, 2011). It also came up that learners are generally able to distinguish whether a careful language selection and an adequate mitigation of corrective feedback occur not to hurt learners' sensitivity and their "sense of self-worth in the interpersonal space" (Kurata, 2011:155).

Moreover, the chapter reveals that these 3 case studies, who in general display a high level of autonomy in the careful selection and creation of their own personal online network, are also autonomous in the management of their own learning, with pedagogical repair trajectories mainly coexisting with social ones. To this regard, the study revealed that learner autonomy and reciprocity are crucial aspects in these case studies. A sense of responsibility for their own partner's learning process, together with assistance seeking and provision proved to be essential factors for the success of the exchange and tandem language learning. Tandem language learning occurs when two learners start a regular partnership with the two-fold objective of learning each other's mother tongue and to help their partner achieve this objective. Tandem language learning rests on the two main principles of reciprocity and autonomy (see chapter 2, section 2.2.3). As the analysis of these interactions and of the interview show, self-instruction occurring in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* can favour learner autonomy but it can also fail to achieve positive results. The difficulty at intertwining firm and long lasting relationships with other learners might reduce learners' engagement and motivation to the platform. As also found by Chotel (2012, 2013), learner autonomy plays a very important role in this sense and it is a pre requirement for an effective learning experience and for a successful tandem partnership. If learners are autonomous, they are able to build up a powerful circle of contacts; they are capable of selecting the best environment for their online interactions (not necessarily *Livemocha* and *Busuu*), to enact strategies during their exchanges and to find adequate topics for their conversations. This last issue emerged in the analysis of the survey and of the online interviews (see Chapter 3, sections 3.2.3 and 3.3.4) and confirmed the results of previous studies (Chotel, 2012, 2013). In the analysis of these case studies there is no evidence of learners' inability to find adequate partners for establishing adequate conversations. This is due to the fact that the learners selected for this analysis already

have a good level of autonomy, had already created a good network of reliable contacts to interact frequently with, they had already had exchanges in the past therefore they knew each other and trust has somewhat already been established between them. Unlike Chotel (2012, 2013), the participants selected as case studies have more frequently focused on form and have negotiated meaning despite the absence of a teacher. These results differ because of the higher level of proficiency of the learners selected for this study, because they already had more established tandem partnerships and because, being volunteers, they were more likely to be motivated and autonomous.

Moreover, it is up to the learner to get most advantage out of what the NS can offer as an expert of the TL. The results of this chapter point at the consideration that a successful tandem language learning experience occurs when partners are already autonomous in their process of learning, and in seeking and providing assistance to each other. The more autonomous they are, the better the exchange develops, the more autonomous they become.

The study also sheds more light on the fact that the skills required for a successful CMC partnership should not be underestimated. These learners have shown that it is quite complex to look for, intertwine and strengthen a relationship with a NS, to negotiate meaning and roles with him/her, to keep the flow of the conversation by exchanging interesting information, and write in a FL without the support of non verbal cues. The analysis, in particular, draws attention on the potential benefits of dyadic CMC occurring between *Livemocha* and *Busuu* L2 learners. Learners are involved in the creation of opportunities to use the language, they often monitor their own and their peers' utterances and sometimes this monitoring leads to correction. Moreover, in the case of text-based chat, the possibility of scrolling represents a valuable aid, since it favours visual salience and prevents communication breakdowns. Another positive finding is that some learners claimed to have saved and revised their conversations with their peers sometimes in order to fix new vocabulary and grammar rules in their minds. This is a sign of meta-reflection and learner autonomy. Interviews and recall interviews further revealed learners' interest and involvement in the research up to the point that two among the case studies wanted to extend the relationship with the researcher to other social networks. Learners' high degree of engagement and motivation of some of them was reflected by

their desire to send more online materials even when the time for the investigation was over. The researcher is aware that these aspects might have somehow biased the results.

As a whole, the findings reported here are encouraging and show that *Livemocha* and *Busuu* are stimulating environments for L2 learners to intertwine initial relationships. However, collaborative dialogue and more beneficial forms of social interactions seem to occur in *Skype* and *MSN*. It is worthy to remark that none of the online interactions submitted by these 3 case studies occurred in *Livemocha* and/or *Busuu* chat. These online communities, as the case studies themselves maintained, were a source where to find possible language partners. These learners displayed high levels of autonomy, a considerable ability of managing social interaction with their peers and in this way nurturing their partnership with their peers. The online interactions in general show evidence of successful peer assistance, support and collaboration among learners.

It was not possible to assess learners' progress in the TL, however it is possible to make some observations about the fact that the case studies achieved a higher level of confidence when using the TL. Case study 1 (William), for instance, is a NS of English who has been learning only Spanish as a FL over the time in which this study has been carrying out. As explained in the previous chapter, before starting every interview, the researcher asked every interviewee to choose the language of the interview among English, Spanish and Italian, which are the languages known to the interviewer. Case 1 did not feel confident enough with his Spanish and the whole interview was done in English (December 2011). When he was interviewed again (October 2012) and he was asked about his language preferences for the interview, he was eager to use Spanish and exhibited a good high-intermediate level of oral proficiency. The interview was conducted fully in Spanish. Similarly, case 3 (Jelena) during the second cycle of interviews decided to adopt the same language (Spanish) that she adopted in the occasion of the first cycle of interviews, which was not her L1 (Serbian) and which was the L2 she felt more familiar with. However, in the course of the interview, she decided to switch to her new TL (Italian). The interviewer adapted flexibly to their language selection in the course of the interview. Jelena flexibly switched from Italian to Spanish several times, showing a lower level of Italian but, at the same time, low hesitation and an active attitude and willingness to create opportunities to use the language.

A limitation of this study is that it has not actually examined learners' progress and language learning outcomes in reference to one or more of the four skills, for example. But it is also true that the study did not set the goal to monitor language progress because it is very difficult to do it, especially in informal/non-formal learning settings where it is even harder to track learners' activities and progress. Learners' accounts of their experience during the interview phase and their reflections emerging from the analysis of their interaction with peers, permitted to gain some insight on the improvement of oral production and oral interaction skills as well as written skills, but there is no empirical evidence of it. It is suggested, therefore, that future empirical research should also explore how and if learners' language proficiency and intercultural competence is enhanced and the degree of impact that the online social environment had on their progress, whether positive or negative. Because of intrinsic characteristics of the online chat tool, in some cases there was inconsistency in spelling, punctuation and attention to correct grammatical forms. Some learners stated that their linguistic accuracy did not improve because of this inattention to grammar rules. However, they still regarded their online activity as valuable to develop their communicative competence in the TL.

Another limitation of the study is the lack of a proper longitudinal approach to learners' online discourse. In other words, it would be useful to track whether learners show apperceived input and whether they are able to incorporate the correct utterance meaningfully in their interactions and employ it across several chat sessions. Nevertheless, it has been very difficult to obtain online conversations at a time distance from the same participants. This was due to the fact that their participation was totally voluntary and that it was difficult to obtain permissions from their language partners. Only the recall interviews have in part replied the question whether the incorporation of a new word or grammar structure has occurred or not.

Another weakness of this study is that it was not possible to study both sides of the partnership equally since the study has focused much more in details on the case studies object of the investigation but not on their language partners. This is due to ethical reasons, to the difficulty in contacting their partners and to institutional constraints related to the PhD process that were outside the researcher's control.

4.6. Conclusion

The chapter has illustrated the different forms of peer assistance enacted by learners interacting in SCMC situations. The analysis of the online interactions of the three case studies has shown that the informal online conversations have a potential for L2 learning provided that learners are already autonomous and motivated. In addition, the recall interviews added more insights to the study because they allowed me to look at learners' identities more in depth and to explore learners' perceptions after the interactional events that saw them as protagonists. In this analysis, AT proved to be a valuable framework to explore learners' objectives and goals and how they directed their language learning process. The following chapter, which will bring together the results of all the methodological phases, will reflect on learners' interrelationships with *Busuu* and *Livemocha* communities at large under the lens of AT.

[CHAPTER 5]

Discussion: L2 learning in online communities

“You live a new life for every new language you speak. If you know only one language, you live only once.”

–Czech proverb

This thesis addressed specific themes related to SCMC conversation, learner autonomy and to the strategies enacted by learners in order to create opportunities for language use. These themes emerged from the analysis of user perceptions by means of the semi-structured interviews (Chapter 3) and from the analysis of their informal spontaneous online interactions in out-of-class settings (Chapter 4). This chapter brings together the results and analyses them further under the framework of AT, then the chapter answers the research questions and provides a set of pedagogical recommendations addressed to practitioners of the online platforms, language learners and teachers wishing to employ these online communities in a classroom context. Hence, it provides a description of the ethical issues at stake when conducting this study, which obliged the researcher to take careful measures in every practice enacted in order to protect learners’ identities and not to harm the learners and the companies involved. Finally, the chapter explains the main contributions of this study and its limitations and suggests directions for further research.

5.1. Integrating theory and cases: final outcomes

The results of the interview phase (chapter 3, section 3.3.4) showed the presence of different profiles of learners, each one characterised by a different use of the platforms and by a different level of engagement and attitude. Three learners’ profiles were identified. To the first profile (1) belong the course takers, who make a wide use of the didactic tools, to the second (2) belong the social networkers, who decided to opt for the social networking features of the communities. The social networkers (learner profile 2) in part prefer interactions because they suit their personal learning style and in part because of

the behaviourist didactic tools of these platforms; to the third profile (3) belong the social course takers, who combine the use of didactic tools with the social networking features of the community (see section 3.3.4). Chapter 3 also revealed that the social course taker (profile 3) tends to become a social networker (profile 2) after a certain period of time and after he has exhausted the potential of the didactic affordances. Chapter 4 analysed learners' interactions of 3 case studies, William, Nastya and Jelena corresponding respectively to "social networkers" (William and Nastya) and "social course taker" (Jelena). The chapter revealed their goals, rules and how they defined their roles with peers. The absence of a case study representing the course taker (learner profile 1) is consistent to what has been explained so far. The interactions of the course taker did not occur by means of the social affordances (chat tool) but only took place at the level of the didactic affordances (peer review after exercise submission).

The next sections answer the research questions after analysing the relations of learners in the online communities by means of AT combining the results of the macro level with the results of the micro level. At a macro level, AT is adopted to explore the dynamics of learners within the community at large drawing on the results of the survey and of the online interviews (chapter 3); at a micro level, AT is employed to reflect on learners' behaviours during their online interactions taking into account the 3 case studies analysed in chapter 4.

5.1.1. Activity Theory and the discussion of findings

Applying Engeström's model of AT to the different learners' profile in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* online communities, AT triangle is the following for the course taker, learner profile 1, who is oriented towards the use of didactic tools:

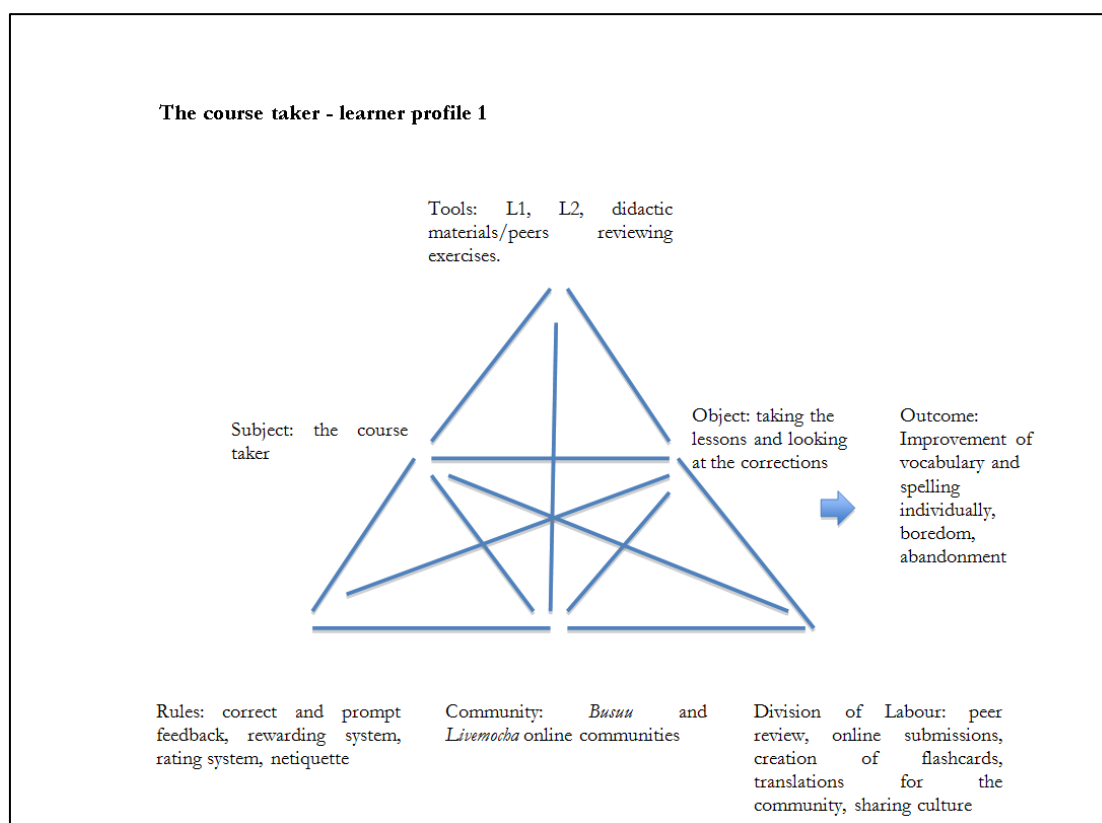


Fig. 5.1 The learning activity in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* communities adapted from Engeström’s model taking into account the “course taker” (learner profile 1).

As image 5.1 illustrates, the learning content (*tools*) mediates the relationship between the course taker (*subject*) and his cross cultural learning and sharing (*object*), which is the main aim of these communities, as advertised in their websites. The learning content (*tools*) empowers the learner but it can also limit the interaction of the learner with the object, that is, with learning and sharing with other NSs. This occurs when the design of the didactic units rather than favouring the contact and the collaboration with NSs, isolate learners and engage them in repetitive behaviourist-like exercises with the help of a recorded voice and with automatic translations, or when the text and video chat tool present technical limitations affecting the communication between learners. Moreover, in the case of the course taker, the relationship between learners (*subject*) and the completion of the didactic affordances (*object*) is mediated by a set of norms (*rules*) that are quite explicit and that have been established in the community. These rules deal with collecting points for progressing with learning units, for carrying out exercises and for giving feedback to other learners. These rules also deal with respect for the other learners and for providing a correct feedback. To this regard, *Livemocha* platform offers very basic

guidelines for peer feedback, but the quality of the feedback, as the results showed, is not guaranteed. In the case of the course taker, the collaborative practices (*division of labour*) are generated mainly by the peer review system, which proved not to work always effectively because of the lack and/or poor quality of peer feedback. The other features (creation of flashcards and culture section) did not seem to be the main channels of attraction by the learners interviewed since the majority of them reported not to have made use of them and a part of them did not know about the existence of these features. At a macro level, the division of labour regards the translations that users themselves do for the communities (in the case of *Livemocha* before the acquisition by *Rosetta Stone*). These translations were learner generated content and the platform could not ensure the quality of them, which was not necessarily a negative aspect because it fostered the sense of community and cooperation (see 5.2.1 for more information about the new changes of *Livemocha*, also in relation to learner generated content).

Instead, the activity of the social networker (learner profile 2), who has a strong social networking attitude, is displayed in the following triangle:

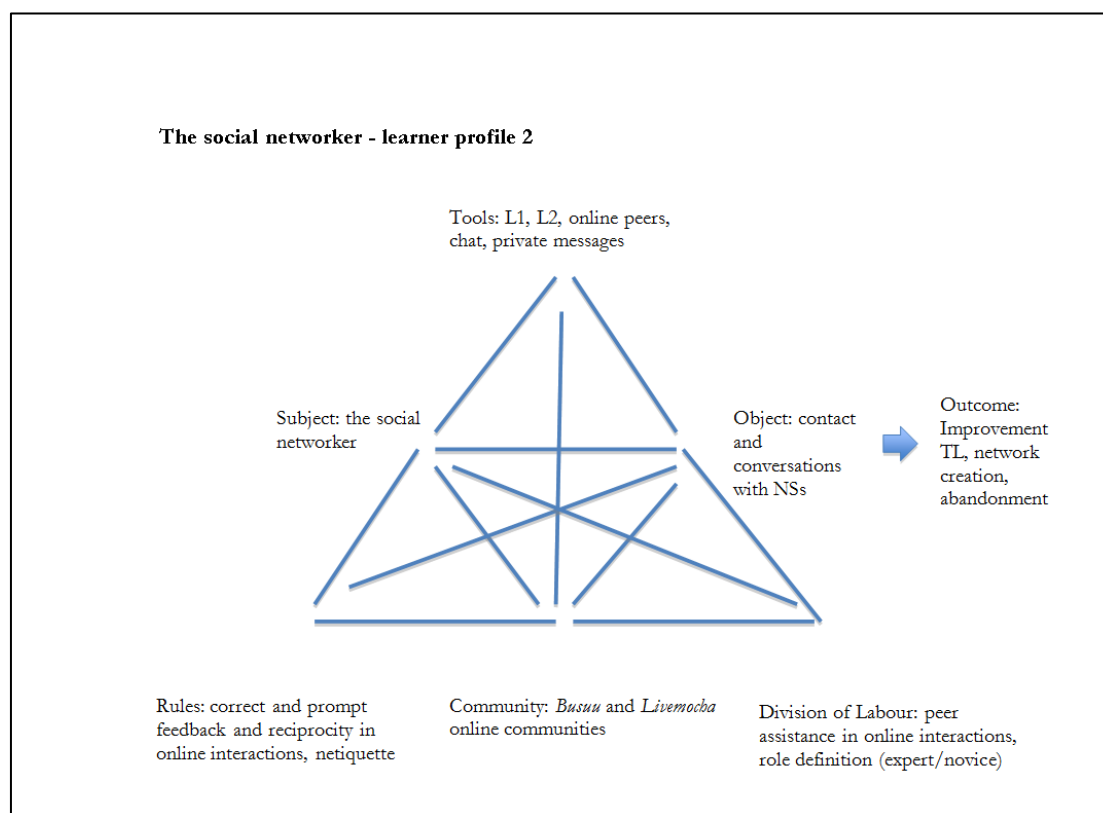


Fig. 5.2 The learning activity in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* communities adapted from Engeström's model taking into account the "social networker" (learner profile 2).

In the case of the social networker, the relationship between these online platforms (*community*) and the contact with NSs (*object*) is mediated by the exchanges, the opportunities of interactions and the peer assistance (*division of labour*) among the participants occurring in the chat tool and in the search option that allows learners to look for online language partners employing filters such as L1, TL, nationality and gender. For the social networker, the division of labour is not represented by the peer feedback taking place during the process of the exercise submission and revision, but occurs mainly in the online chat tool and in a minority of cases through private messages (asynchronous tool) (*tools*). This is the reason why I have named the division of labour occurring mainly in the synchronous chat tool (and seldom through the asynchronous tool of private messages) as “peer assistance”. The aim was to embrace peer feedback but also other forms of practices that are crucially important and that benefit tandem partnership to a large extent, such as didactic material sharing, emotional aid and help with metalinguistic awareness. The activity of the social networker unfolds during the online interactions and, during the conversational events, the division of labour is usually negotiated among learners who have to agree on their roles of expert and novice during the interactional episodes. Chapter 4 has showed that this form of division of labour proved to help the tandem partnerships. The norms (*rules*) of the social networker coincide with the norms of tandem language learning, are learned during the interactions and are constantly shaped according to the language partner. This typology of learner, in addition, inhabits *Livemocha* and *Busuu* community but his engagement flexibly shifts to other communities (other web apps) according to his and his partner’s needs. The macro level of the social networker is the interchangeability between the online platforms and other web apps and the micro level is the “online moment-to-moment interactions” (Blin, 2012:92) with peers in the chat tool or other SCMC tools.

Learner profile 3, the social course taker, is a hybrid and combines the features of the course taker (learner profile 1) and the social networker (learner profile 2).

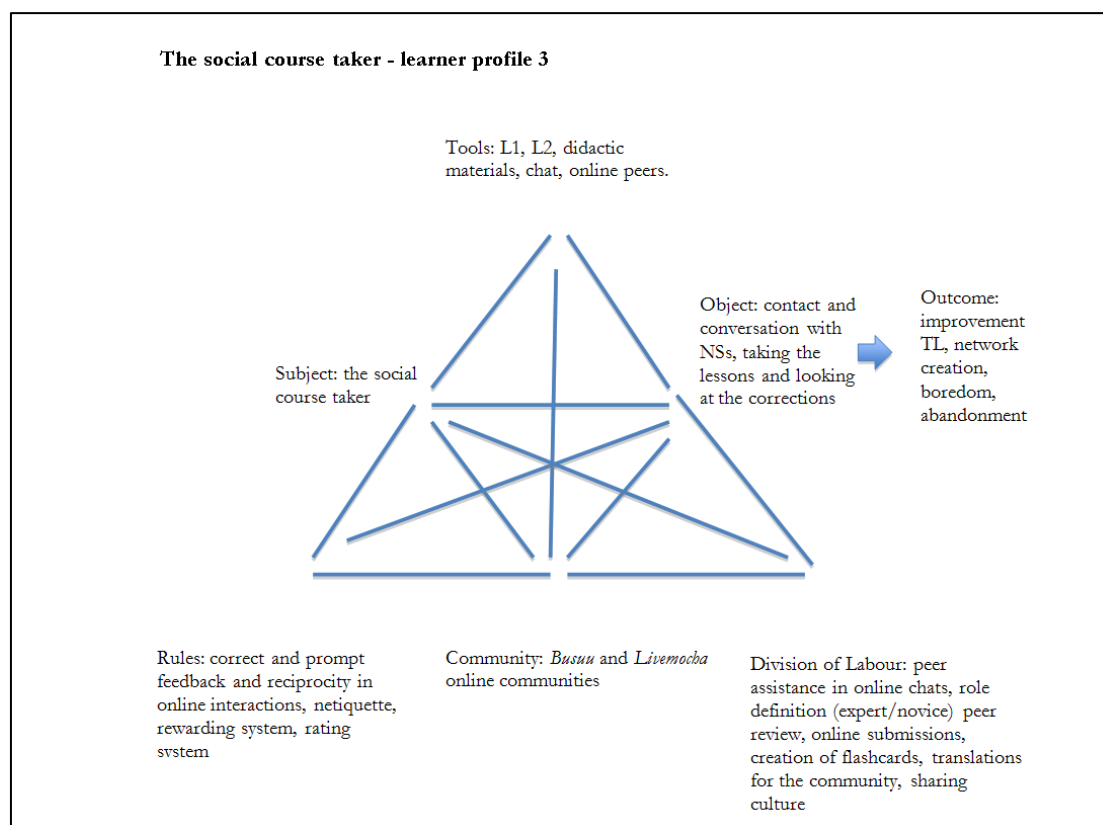


Fig. 5.3 The learning activity in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* communities adapted from Engeström’s model taking into account the “social course taker” (learner profile 3).

As image 5.3 above suggests, the social course taker’s (*subject*) relationship with the platforms (*community*) is mediated by the social affordances (*tools/chat*), by the didactic affordances (*tools/learning materials*), by the L1 (or L2 in which he is proficient and by the TL) itself. The aim (*object*) of this learner is both the contact with NSs and reinforcing the knowledge of the TL through the learning units in collaboration with the peers encountered in the community. The norms (*rules*) combine the norms of the course taker (learner profile 1) and the norms of the social networker (learner profile 2). Peer assistance (*division of labour*) occurs at different levels: peer review in the online submissions, cultural sharing in the Livemocha Culture Section, learner generated content (flashcards and translations for the community) and, last but not least, the peer assistance occurring during the conversations in the online chat. The activity system of this typology of learner is the most complete and his engagement to the online platforms is the most long-lasting. But, after months, the social course taker tends to turn into a social networker (learner profile 2). Once he has exhausted and fulfilled his expectations about the didactic affordances of the community, he tends to inhabit it merely using the social affordances as mediational tools. As for the social networker, the social course taker’s engagement also flexibly shifts to other communities (other web apps) and he draws on

Livemocha and *Busuu* communities as a means to find language partners. The macro level of the social course taker is the shift between the online platforms and other web apps but also the community system at large, and the micro level are all the forms of online interactions he is able to intertwine (peer review submission, private messages, chat tool, contributions to the culture section, and the didactic units and lessons).

During the interview analysis, a common result (reported by 25 interviewees) was the occurrence of cyberflirting episodes. The cyberflirter (subject) is oriented towards the main aim (object) of interacting with the other users of the community without taking into consideration the other people's goals, the norms of the community (rules) and idea of how contributing to the other learners' learning process (division of labour). The main interactional tools of the cyberflirter are the private message system, the synchronous chat and the language itself. His TL and is L1 (or L2 if he feels expert) are very important mediational artifacts to attract the other learners (usually of the opposite gender) and to intertwine relationships with them. When two cyberflirters meet, this meeting might hypothetically produce relationship building and potential language learning. However, in my results there is no evidence of this aspect.

In conclusion, under the lens of AT's system, learners' activities can be interpreted in such a way: the learner (*subject*) is acting in an online community (*community*) that is oriented towards a common *object(ive)* that is, achieving intercultural sharing and learning. However, as the results of the analysis revealed, learners orientate towards their objectives in different ways and enact different actions to achieve different goals that often create contradictions and tensions. In fact, there are learners more interested in learning units and in receiving correct feedback and revisions and learners whose main intention is informal interaction through the chat.

Analysing the subtriangles in detail, more observations can be made. Considering the triangle subject-tools-object, learners are moved by different beliefs on the most effective way of learning the TL, therefore they achieve their objectives in different ways, which means that they make use of different tools with the purpose of achieving specific goals. Especially in the case of the social course taker (learner profile 3), there are different and sometimes competing goals, the use of the didactic and social affordances with the aim of respectively studying the language in a non-formal way through traditional

lessons and practicing the language in an informal way through the online interactions. These competing goals are also reflected during the interactional episodes when learners are not able to cope with both the social and the learning trajectory simultaneously.

Similarly, taking into account the relations among the poles subject-tools-community, it is possible to look at the social dimension of the activity. The results have been interpreted in such a way to take into consideration the tools each learner decides to adopt and the use he decides to make of these tools in order to come into contact with the other members of the community. When two different profiles of learners come into contact, contradictions and tensions emerge in the system. Different orientations imply different practices and different actions that do not always match with each other. The communities are inhabited by learners who prefer to complete the units and progress throughout the several didactic units offered by the platform and there are other learners who visit the communities frequently with the only aim of meeting other learners to practice the TL with, without having completed a single didactic unit. Different learner profiles prefer different tools. In AT, the tools mediate the interactions between subject and community. But, in the case of these platforms, the tools are not always able to work as mediational artifacts between the subject and the community, that is, between learners and the other L2 learners of the community.

Moreover, the analysis of the triangle tools-community-object, reveals that the tools of the community do not work in synergy towards the object of cross cultural learning and sharing. On the one hand, the learning units are not interactive and isolate learners from real interaction with NSs; on the other hand, the chat tool represents a more valuable mediational tool between learners and community but it is a tool that presents contradictions in itself. The tool presents technical problems, learners are not always able to manage it for pedagogical purposes in order to achieve their objectives and does not work in conjunction with the other tools (the learning units, the flashcards, etc). For this reason, each member pursues different objectives according to his/her needs and different forms of online interactions are generated. These interactions are limited to a random peer feedback in the case of the course taker (learner profile 1), and they are more spontaneous and complete in the case of the social networker (learner profile 2) and the social course taker (learner profile 3) because they involve different forms of peer assistance in the chat tool (including peer feedback). As explained in chapter 3 (see 3.3.4 and 3.3.5),

the giving receiving peer feedback system does not necessarily implies communication. Instead, the chat tool might allow learners to strengthen their bonds with their language partners.

In relation to the triangle subject-object-community, the results showed that there is a mismatch between the object of the community developers (cross cultural learning and sharing, as advertised in their webpages) and what the platforms' affordances actually allow learners to do. The interview phase, in particular, revealed that the course taker (learner profile 1), despite the initial enthusiasm, was deceived and progressively disengaged by the repetition, the lack of originality and the inaccuracies of the didactic affordances, as the interviewees belonging to this profile reported. Instead, the social networker (learner profile 2) was disappointed by the social affordances, first because of the difficulty at finding adequate language partners. Once these learners have found a language partner, for some of them it is hard to find topics to continue the conversation after the initial online exchanges with unknown partners. The social course taker (learner profile 3) witnessed problems at both the level of the didactic and the social affordances. Many learners reported that they felt that they were learning and sharing only up to a certain extent. But the analysis of the results revealed that the subjects in general did not have high expectations about the platforms and tended to consider it as a supporting environment for language practice.

The analysis of subject-rules-community, showed that the relationship between learners (*subject*) and their different objectives for the improvement of the TL (*object*) is mediated by a set of norms (*rules*) that can be both explicit and implicit and have been established in the community. These rules deal with the rewarding system, the guidelines for peer feedback, and the respect for other learners. Not all learners had a shared view on the rules of the community and that their perceptions of it differed. The analysis of the interviews showed that some learners saw the platforms merely as learning environments and discarded any other form of interaction beyond the exercise revision and submission because they deemed informal social interactions taking place in the chat tool or in the Culture Section as not serious and in opposition to the norms of the community. For this reason, when they were approached by other members whose goals were different and less oriented to the use of the didactic tools, they experienced a different perception of the norms of the community. The analysis of learners' online interaction (see chapter

4) revealed that the learners selected as case studies are mainly aware of the importance of rules during the interactions. These rules regard providing correct feedback without hurting the partner's sensitivity, to adapt to the partner's discourse, not to interrupt the social and learning trajectory, to cooperate to provide any form of assistance, to be able to accept and incorporate the feedback provided by the language partner.

Finally, from the analysis of the triangle object-division of labour-community, the collective practices that *Livemocha* and *Busuu* host emerged. The relationship between the online platforms (communities) and the learners' different objectives (object) is mediated by the didactic materials, by the exchanges, by the opportunities of interactions and by the peer review system (division of labour) among the participants to the activity. At a macro level these collective practices are represented by the review submission system. At a micro-level, that is, at the level of the dyadic interactions among learners, AT made it possible to explain that the interactants agreed on the expert and novice roles during the conversational episodes and that when they divide each other's labour in this sense, the interactional episodes were more likely to work out.

The analysis now is following other important conceptual tools connected to AT. As explained in chapter 2 (2.2.2), Engeström suggests five main principles to decline AT. Here the results of the analysis are reported in relation to each principle.

(1) *Network relations*. The collective activity system of *Livemocha* and *Busuu* has to be seen in its relation to other activity systems. The online system is in relation with a possible L2 offline activity system as well as the non-formal learning activity system is in relation with a possible formal learning activity system. The interviews phase has provided some important insights on this issue. For example, the analysis has shown that each learner represents a system in itself and that there are learners to which correspond both offline and online activities and an offline and online learning community. These systems are intertwined and inevitably influence each other. The data revealed that the platforms were inhabited by learners studying the TL as a FL and learners studying the TL as a Second Language (SL). This implied a different use of the platform and different attitudes. Learners studying the TL as a FL did not have a supporting offline community and tended to be more engaged to the platforms and to the online community of NSs. From the data analysis it also emerged that there was a significant amount of learners

taking a formal course and considering the platforms as a support to their offline activities. In their case, the presence of the offline community of the formal course interfered positively with their activities in the online community. For instance, some learners “exploited” the communities and looked for NSs in order to clarify grammar problems and new vocabulary issues generated during the attendance of a formal course. But in the case of other learners attending a formal course (or having attended a formal course), the augmented level of complexity due to two activity systems interacting (the activity system of the formal course and the activity system of the online community) lead to problems. These learners contrasted the formal course with the online community and expected to find in the online communities what their formal learning environment was able to offer but for free. At the end, they were disappointed when they discovered that the online communities did not meet their expectations.

(2) *Multi-voicedness*. *Livemocha* and *Busuu* are multi-voiced activity systems. They are communities of multiple points of view and perspectives. In the activity system of these online communities, each L2 learner has his own cultural background, personal history, personal learning style, which shape different goals and motives. As a consequence, the division of labour in an activity is influenced by this polyphonic presence of different positions. The analysis revealed that learners have different views and perceptions about the learning community, there are learners more oriented towards the completion of the structural exercises, who tend to follow the order of the units’ and lessons’ path and who expect a detailed and accurate peer feedback, and other learners whose expectations is to find easily a network of language partners to rely on during the online conversations in the chat tool (there several nuances and gradations between these opposite poles). The results show the presence of frequent tensions due to different ways of conceiving the object of the activity. The tensions also regard the different level of familiarity with the tools (Blin, 2012; Engeström, 2001), for instance not all learners were fully aware of the rewarding system (Mochapoints and Berries) of the platforms, of the presence of flashcards or of the correct use of the chat. In addition, as previous literature underscored (Blin, 2012; Hasu & Engeström, 2000), the object of the activity is negotiated and reshaped by the different participants and in the different moments during the activity because multi-voicedness “is a source of trouble and a source of innovation, demanding actions of translations and negotiation” (Engeström, 2001:136). This aspect emerged clearly during the informal online interactions during which learners switched the roles

of novice and expert of the TL according to each other's needs and to each other's level of proficiency and during which meaning is constantly negotiated (see chapter 4). As Blin (2012) remarks, the learners involved in telecollaboration activities are like “interacting activity systems” (p.95), they have to identify the contradictions, solve them and expand their learning towards the construction of a shared object in what Gutiérrez (2008) defines a “third space” (p.152). This third space is visible in the following image:

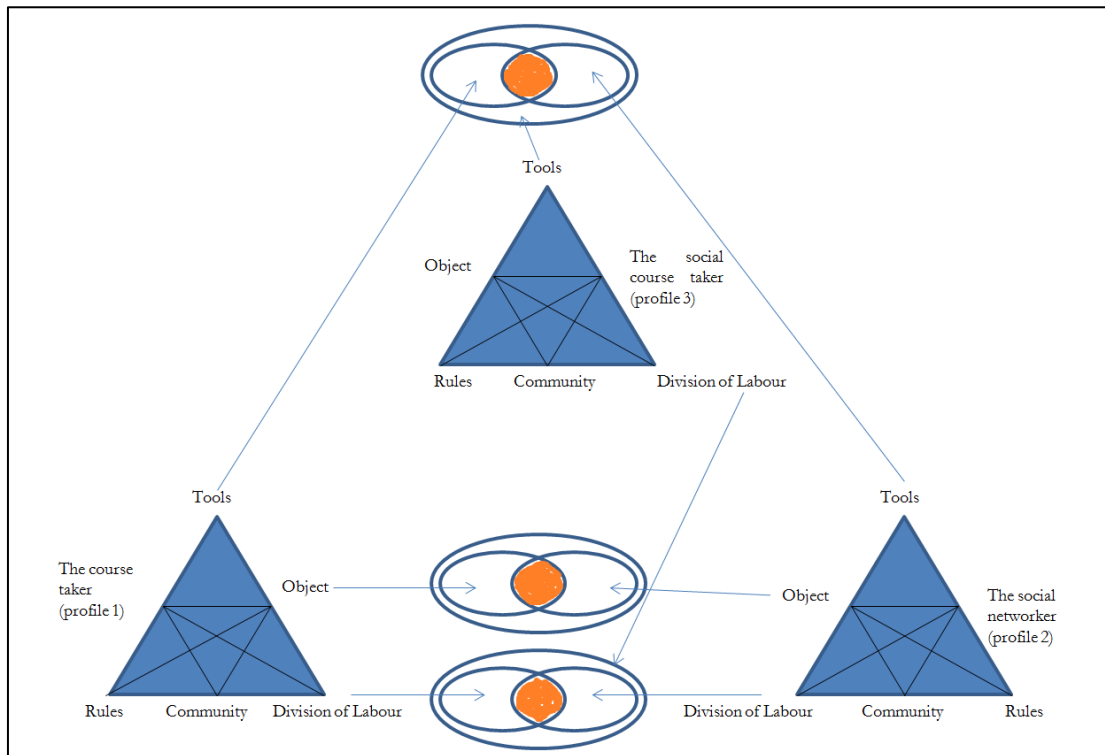


Fig. 5.4 Joint activity system of the 3 profiles of learners (adapted from Engeström, 2001 and Blin, 2012)

As image 5.4 illustrates, each triangle represents each learner profile's activity system. The course taker (learner profile 1) and the social networker (learner profile 2) are moved by different objectives, use different tools and have a different idea of peer assistance (division of labour) is. But when these different profiles of learners meet, if they solve the contradictions, they might generate third spaces in common (in orange in the image). This occurs, for instance, when the course taker has submitted an exercise and the exercise has been reviewed by the social networker. Then the two learners might start online exchanges with the two-fold objective of clarifying doubts regarding the didactic units and the exercises and, at the same time, establishing a spontaneous and free-topic online conversation. The social course taker (learner profile 3), who combines the

use of both social and didactic affordances, is supposed to share object, tools and division of labour of the other two profiles. Therefore, his third space is wider, it embraces all the others and his experience of the platforms is more complete.

(3) *History*. Applying this principle to L2 learning in online communities as an activity system, it emerged that one of the community under study, *Livemocha*, has changed its norms and rules since the time this study was conducted. The transformation has been a response to previous problems (evidenced in this study and in previous literature) such as little variety of lessons and exercises and inaccuracy of translations and peer feedback because they were provided by the other learners. After the acquisition from *Rosetta Stone*, *Livemocha* evolved into a community with more articulated and varied lessons, with automatic translations made by *Google* and with corrective feedback provided by experts. However, the current changes introduced in the platform are far from suit better learners' needs and seem not to have taken into account the observations reported in previous studies about the constraints of the platform (for a more detailed description see 5.2.1).

(4) *Contradictions*. Analysing *Livemocha* and *Busuu* online communities under the lens of AT, it was possible to identify tensions and contradictions within the activity system. These contradictions mainly concern tools, didactic materials and social chat. The didactic materials consist of structural exercises (focus on form exercises, pattern drills, lists of words to memorize and to combine and based on the stimulus-response model) belonging to the audio-lingual structural approach. This past approach seems to be “in tension” and not to work in synergy with the social and communicative tools represented by the online chat, with the idea of online community itself and with the search of interaction with peers, which resembles more communicative approaches. Since the didactic affordances are in tension with the social affordances of the platforms, they provoke “problems, ruptures, breakdowns, clashes” (Kuutti, 1996:34) between the “micro-level events” (Engeström, 2008:26), that is, the interactions, and the “macro-level structures” (the platform at large). Examples of tensions are the poor quality or lack of peer feedback after the online submission of the exercises, difficulty at finding tandem partners, and lack of topics between tandem partners. In addition, the different actions carried out by different individuals might create disturbances to the collective actions (Blin, 2012). In other words, given that these communities are inhabited by the three aforementioned catego-

ries of users, the actions of each subject in the communities are shaped by different motives, beliefs and objects. Therefore, when the course takers (learner profile 1, who make an extensive use of the didactic units) come into contact with the social networkers (learner profile 2, who make an extensive use of the social networking features of the platform through the chat tool), two different motives (socialization vs language learning) generate tensions because for some learners they are incompatible motives. The social course taker (learner profile 3, who uses both didactic units and the chat tool), is driven by both these motives and is usually the most able to cope with the other profiles of learners. In sum, learners adopt different behaviours because they do not share the same sense of belonging to the community and because they are driven by different goals. The platforms, along with the available tools that do not work in synergy towards a common goal, contribute to emphasize these tensions.

(5) *Expansive cycles* correspond to expansive transformations that are correlated to the contradictions. When the contradictions in the activity system emerge, “some individual participants begin to question and deviate from its established norms” (Engeström, 2001:137). The “qualitative transformations” in the system of online communities concern the establishing of new practices by online L2 learning when they are able to create their own personal community of people for language learning. After having created their own network, since the community system is not satisfactory, many learners decide to move away from the pre-established language practices of *Livemocha* and *Busuu* community and start introducing new artifacts by adopting different tools such as *Skype*, where they start new collaborative practices. This does not necessarily entail a drop-out from the community since many learners continue to consider it as a valuable resource for intertwining new relations and enlarge their network, but it leads to new types of activities and new practices that lead to expansive learning (Blin, 2012; Blin & Appel, 2011).

In the light of this analysis, the next section will put forward the answer to the initial research questions of this study.

5.1.2 *Research questions revisited*

This thesis set out to investigate the affordances and constraints of online communities for language learning covering three main areas of interest (learners' behaviours, peer assistance and time factor) and two main levels, the didactic and the social affordances.

Two main questions thus constitute the focus of the study:

1st Question. What kinds of opportunities for L2 use occur in the online communities for L2 learning and what social and contextual factors affect and contribute to the construction of such opportunities and to learners' perceptions of L2 learning?

2nd Question. What are the affordances and constraints of the online communities for L2 learning in relation to their effectiveness for long-term learning outcomes?

In order to answer the above broad questions, the thesis took as its starting point the learner and its relationship with the community as a whole, interpreting the community as an activity system and considering the learner as a social actor, with its own identity and its own goals. In addition, the main principles of AT such as multi-voicedness, historicity, expansive cycles and contradictions as sources of development and change, helped shedding more light on the dynamics of these online communities and allowed me to answer the research questions.

The subquestions embedded in the first research question covered the area of *learners' behaviour* and the area of *peer assistance* at two levels, the level of the social affordances and the level of the didactic affordances.

With reference to learners' behaviour, three main behaviours were identified to which correspond the three different aforementioned profiles of learners: the course taker (learner profile 1), the social networker (learner profile 2), and the social course taker (learner profile 3). These learners hold a different conception of the community. Their different uses of the online communities and their different patterns of behaviour give rise to different opportunities to use the TL and to different performances. The course taker is given the possibility to use his TL in the process of exercise submission and peer feedback but results showed that there are several and occasional contextual and

social factors constraining his opportunities of language use. These factors deal with the lack and/or poor quality of peer feedback, with the old-fashioned approach of the didactic material and with the focus-on-form exercises of the online platforms, which do not allow for communicative and interactive opportunities of L2 use. The social networker is more active than the course taker in creating opportunities for language use because the social affordances of the platforms (mainly the chat tool) permit him to do so. However, contextual constraints at the level of the social affordances also occur and prevent the social networker from having a fully rewarding experience: these constraints mainly regard the difficulty at finding language partners, at establishing conversation topics and at consolidating the tie with the language partner within the platform. The social course taker lives the experience of both the course taker and the social networker.

The results of the interview phase also showed that learners are highly aware of the conditions of self-learning that the uncontrolled environment of the social networks offers but not everybody are capable of responding to self-learning conditions as autonomous learners. The different ways in which the participants of these online communities operate and construct their actions correspond to a different degree of learner autonomy. Autonomous learners in these communities are those who tend to make the best use of the platforms. They are able to find language partners and topics of conversation, to provide proper assistance, they are open to the feedback received by peers, they combine their self-directed learning with other resources (a formal course, other social media, personal tools), they are able to create their personal network of contacts, they develop digital critical literacy. Their expectations about these environments do not go beyond what they can actually offer and, being aware of this aspect, they employ the platforms as a supporting tool for reinforcing grammar, vocabulary and structures (the course taker and the social course taker) and as a meeting place on which to draw for starting a new language partnership (the social networker and the social course taker). Independently of whether they perceive the platforms merely as learning environments, as a SNS or as both of them, their self-learning is oriented towards their needs, of which they are highly aware. But, in the case of autonomous learners of the course taker (profile 1), these needs do not include L2 interactional use because they are less interested in it and more interested in the didactic material. In this case, because of the problematic issues concerning the didactic affordances of these communities, their engagement to the platforms is gradually destined to decrease. In the case of the social networker and the so-

cial course taker (profiles 2 and 3), the extent of autonomy exhibited is clearly visible in the dyadic interactions. Chapter 4 revealed that they create opportunities for L2 use by adopting polite strategies to maintain social cohesion and to strengthen the interpersonal relationships with their tandem partner, such as use of humour, colloquial expressions, abbreviations, agreement on the role of experts and novices, proper peer assistance receive and provision. Chapter 4 also shed light on the social and contextual factors affecting language choice and maintenance during the interactions. It emerged that learners adopt code-switching as a verification strategy, in order to create opportunities to use the TL, for assistance request, for assistance provision, in order to avoid the language in which the learner is not confident, in order to organize the ongoing discourse, to suspend the learning trajectory and continue with the social trajectory.

In order to answer the first question with reference to the area of peer assistance, it was necessary to consider learners' interactions during the peer review of the exercises (didactic affordances) and learners' dyadic online interactions during their spontaneous conversations in the chat tool (social affordances). At the level of didactic affordances, results show contradictory results, evidence of effective peer assistance receiving and provision but also evidence of lack or poor quality of it in the online submissions. Learners in general, as it is possible to extrapolate from their accounts during the interview phase, are highly aware of the reciprocity or lack of it between themselves and their peers and this is a crucial factor that determines their level of engagement to the platform in the case of the course taker (learner profile 1) in particular. At the level of the social affordances, more evidence of effective peer assistance and provision was found and several forms of peer assistance were identified, especially analysing the online interactions between the case studies: emotional support about L2 learning, emotional support beyond learning trajectory, grammar explanation, metalinguistic assistance, sharing intercultural pragmatics, sharing materials, suggestions, technical assistance and the following forms of peer feedback: explicit and implicit, lexical (word explanation/search), morphosyntactic and affective. The polite strategies enacted to foster peers' improvement during the dyadic interactions revolve around mitigation actions during repair sequences in order not to hurt their partner's sensitivity, agreement on the roles of expert and novice before or during the conversational episodes, the maintenance of both the social and learning trajectory, the use of effective code-switching, the adoption of devices for formatting text (in the case of textual chat) (capital letters, colours, italics), the

adoption of the teacher language (in the case of the spoken chat) to provide a more effective repair, the search of adequate topics of conversation and the maintenance of intersubjectivity. Results showed that learners perceive learning potential in these online exchanges and that a few of them can rely on a small network of contacts to interact with a daily frequency approximately. In addition, more autonomous learners seem to be able to advantage from these exchanges because they “exploit” the contact with their language partners in order to corroborate and clarify aspects related to a formal learning course or an exam (as in the case of William and Jelena), or in order to prepare themselves for a stay abroad where the TL is spoken (as in the case of Nastya).

The second main question revolved around the *time factor* issue. As recalled during the data analysis, all three profiles of learners witness a decrease of engagement to the online communities over time (5-6 months). This is especially true in the case of the course taker (learner profile 1), which implies that the main problems concerns the didactic tools, as already observed in this chapter. This constraint also affects peer assistance, and, as a consequence, learners’ engagement. The absence of contextualization of the didactic materials makes peer revision even more complicated because when NSs or those who are expert of learners’ TL are requested to provide peer feedback, they are not really aware about what the submitter has studied before sending the exercise, what vocabulary he has learnt and what the objectives of that given didactic unit were. This inevitably generates learners’ drop-out. Basically, the behaviourist didactic content of these communities seems to have been designed without the support of any pedagogical principle and clearly reflect the mentality of a company pursuing profits. The evidence of this is given by the presence of didactic content and/or features not accessible to basic users, unless they pay a fee. This is especially evident in the case of *Busuu*, which poses more restrictions to the content available and which more insistently pushes users paying for the Premium features.

In relation to the social affordances, the main affordance of the online communities is the possibility for learners to meet NSs of the TL. But the results showed the tendency of learners to have zapping interactions through the chat tool, which entails that for most of them it is very difficult to establish reliable and firm tandem partnerships that develop over time. When this occurs, learners’ preference usually goes to other social media for SCMC and the use of the platform will occur sporadically as a source where to

draw for finding other adequate language partners in order to intertwine new relationships and enlarge the number of contacts. The network bonds that learners are able to intertwine proved to influence their commitment to online L2 learning when stronger and more solid ties are established. This was possible when learners already have a good degree of autonomy at the moment of joining the platform.

Beyond the didactic and the social affordances, there are other important issues affecting learners' engagement over time and the sustainability of these platforms for meeting long-term learning outcomes: the presence of cyberflirting and hoaxing and the offline behaviour. The issue of cyberflirting and hoaxing was the most common result that emerged in the interview phase and in part determined learners' progressive lack of interest towards the platforms. The occurrence of such episodes conveyed the idea that the platform was not a "serious" place for learning and contributed to the negative situation of random interactions and lack/poor peer-review (because potential tandem partners were not deemed as reliable). The offline behaviours of learners (the attendance of a formal course, for instance) played an important role as well. On the one hand, learners attending a formal course deemed the platforms as a support to reinforce the knowledge of the TL acquired offline. On the other hand, learners attending a formal language course tended to contrast their course with the platforms, tended to be deceived by the platforms and then tended to rely exclusively on formal practices, which in the case of the participants of this study were offline.

To conclude, considering the results analysed, it is possible to maintain that a successful tandem language learning experience occurs when partners are already autonomous in their process of learning and in seeking and providing assistance to each other. The more autonomous they are, the better the exchange develops, the more autonomous they become. Moreover, it is up to the learner to get most advantage out of what the NS can offer as an expert of the TL. This study further demonstrates that "for the exchange to be successful the learner needs a minimum of autonomy which will then further develop as a result of the exchange" (Appel, 1999:14). It would be worthwhile to comment that Appel's (1999) study dealt with tandem email exchanges in a time which was the dawn of Web 2.0. The current study, 16 years later and in the flourishing of social media, revolves around online communities and synchronous voice/text exchanges. Despite time distance and the different conditions of these exchanges, this statement by Appel can be

still applied to this study. This is a clear evidence of the fact that the technology itself does not determine the increase of learner autonomy and that more research is still needed to create pedagogically favourable conditions for the development of learner autonomy in online environments.

The next sections suggest possible solutions to overcome the current constraints identified in this thesis with regard to these online communities and a set of guidelines for platform developers, learners and teachers on how to make the most out of these online platforms.

5.2. Turning obstacles into opportunities for L2 learning

Kirschner (2002) defines the term *affordances* as “the perceived properties of a thing in reference to a user that influences how it is used” (p. 12). He also distinguishes between technological, social and educational affordances.

Technological affordances combine “not only the properties of a medium that affect how they can be/are used, but also how (and if) they are perceived and the relationships that exist between the properties and the users” (p. 13).

Social affordances refer to “the relationship between the properties of an object and the social characteristics of a group that enable particular kinds of interaction among members of that group” (Bradner, Kellogg, & Erickson, 1999:153; Kirschner, 2002:18).

Finally, *educational affordances* combine the previous two and are “those characteristics of an artefact (e.g. how a chosen educational paradigm is implemented) that determine if and how a particular learning behaviour could possibly be enacted within a given context (e.g. Project team, distributed learning community).” (p.19).

The online communities under exam offer potentially technical, social and educational affordances (Kirschner, 2002) for L2 learning and for the development of autonomous language use. But effective learning and autonomous language use will not just occur because these communities present educational, technological and social affordances that allow individual learners and groups of language learners to do so.

Starting from this reflection on the concept of affordances, the following sections offer guidelines on how to improve the affordances of the online communities for L2 learning

and how to promote a better use of them from the multiple points of view of platform developers, learners and teachers.

5.2.1. Pedagogical recommendations for the online communities

This section of the thesis is addressed to ICT developers, course designers, to the companies of the online communities designed for L2 learning, such as the two studied here, *Livemocha* and *Busuu*, and to any expert in the field wishing to discover and to exploit these social spaces at their best in such a way that their affordances can be realized, rather than being confined to the realm of potentialities. This section deals with designing proper interactional and didactical resources in online communities.

The interpretation of *Livemocha* and *Busuu* online communities as activity systems has shed more light on their internal structure and contradictions. It is essential to focus on the pedagogical and environmental issues that emerged from this analysis and on the possible solutions to overcome their intrinsic limitations and promote innovations.

If we analyse the platforms as activity systems, it is clear that the educational, technological and social affordances of online communities should be integrated and work in synergy with each other. Considering the correlation between *subject* (the learner), *community* (peers) and *tools* (focus on form exercises), it is possible to maintain that these tools, being the mediational artifacts between learners and the surrounding environment, are supposed to make their contribution to the transformation of the object into an outcome. The platforms' affordances have the object(ive) of putting into contact learners with NSs of their TL across the world and this would lead to the outcome of improving their TL. In other words, the learning content and the exercises (tools) mediate the relationship between learners (subject) and their cross cultural learning and sharing (object), which is the main aim of these communities. However, contradictions in the system occur. In fact, the exercises (tools) empower the learner but they also limit the interaction of the learner with the object, that is, with learning and sharing with other NSs. This occurs because the design of the exercises, rather than favouring the contact and the collaboration with NSs, isolate learners and engage them in repetitive behaviourist-like exercises with the help of an automated voice and when the text and video chat tool present technical limitations affecting the communication between learners. The tools of the community do not work in synergy towards the object of cross cultural learning and

sharing because its focus on form exercises and its learning units are not interactive and isolate learners from real interaction with NSs.

The tools present in these communities generate contradictions between learners' needs of communication and interaction and their learning process. As a result, learners' engagement to the communities tends to decrease after an initial period of high commitment. This is shown in all the studies about these online communities, this one included. And this study adds that, it is not a case that learners who are most likely to abandon the community are the course takers (learner profile 1, who just makes use of the didactic resources). In addition, from the results it emerged that these environments can be complementary to formal learning practices provided that effective pedagogical tasks are designed. These tasks have to be designed in such a way to be carried out by learners with the rest of the community at large and should involve the creation of an artefact.

The main recommendation addressed to platform developers is the following: for learners to take the most advantage out of these learning communities and in order to prevent learners' dropping out, it is necessary that all the tools of the communities work in synergy towards a common object(ive). This means that the didactic units and the chat, rather than working separately, should be integrated through a task-based approach to language learning. Previous research (Pibworth, 2011) has already stressed the lack of synergy between the synchronous and the asynchronous tools of these online communities. Zourou and Loiseau (2013), for instance, reflected on the Culture section of *Livemocha*. This feature, which had a lot of potential for intercultural learning and peer support, was available when this study was conducted but it is not currently present. With regard to that section, Zourou and Loiseau (2013) suggested that the community should foster more participation and lead the participants to read each other's contributions, and also provide more guidelines on how to get the most out of all its tools. They also suggested the creation of a gateway to from the Culture section to the learning materials with the introduction of pedagogical tasks for practicing production skills. In the current version of *Livemocha* the chat tool is not available and has been replaced exclusively by a private message system that does not allow learners to see if the other learners are online and does not properly notify incoming messages, which are detracting factors that prevent learners from practicing the TL in a SCMC condition.

In this study, I suggest that these platforms, rather than presenting focus on form exercises, should offer more authentic and meaningful tasks, according to a TBLT (Task-based Language Teaching and Learning) approach. A language learning task is defined as a “meaningful, authentic, communicative activity” (Oxford, Cho, Leung & Kim, 2004:7). Basically, it is necessary to combine the didactic aspect with the social one more effectively with the creation of focus-on-meaning tasks, more based on real life contexts and focused on a specific learning goal. In other words, learners have to carry out their tasks on the platform and, at the same time, the platform has to connect learners with each other by means of the chat tool in order to perform both synchronous and asynchronous communicative situations together.

Another issue regards the interactional learning events through the chat tool. If learners are autonomous and have both a high proficiency level in the TL, their interactions might work out effectively and this study is proof of it even though the interactions between the case studies developed outside of the communities under exam. But the interactional tool cannot be long lasting if learners are not equally proficient in each other’s TL because they would perceive an unequal share of benefits from the interactional event. Similarly, if both learners have the same language level and in both cases this level is basic, language practice through the chat tool is not likely to have a positive outcome. Previous studies found out (Gruba & Clark, 2013) that basic learners find it very hard to interact in the chat in the TL and feel intimidated. This study showed evidence of basic learners’ attempt to use the TL (Tom trying to speak Russian with case 3, Nastya) and helped by the NS and showed that Tom had to reselect his L1 because his opportunities for the TL use were very limited. In such cases, the platform has to be able to provide a solution. If basic learners meet in the chat tool in order to carry out a speaking task adequate to their level, they would both benefit equally from the interaction.

Another recommendation regards the features of learning tasks. According to Lamy & Mangenot (2013), learning tasks have to be oriented towards four forms of communication: mutualization, discussion, cooperation and collaboration. The first two can take place in large groups, while the second two in small groups. Mutualization occurs when learners give their point of view to a given topic and read each other’s contribution without interacting with others; the second form, discussion, happens when learners produce a contribution taking into account the views of other peers and explicitly make

reference to them; the third form is cooperation, which is when tasks are distributed among learners and each learner carries out his own task; finally, the fourth form is collaboration and it implies learners' joint creation of an artifact and the negotiation among learners during the whole process. This is definitively the most challenging form of learning and it is difficult to achieve. None of these forms of learning is currently present in online communities. Mutualization and discussion are easier to achieve because they do not imply negotiation of meaning, problem solving, co-construction and joint planning. These forms of communication can be obtained by means of a forum, adequate tasks and learners posting comments. Instead, for cooperation and collaboration, platform designers together with language teachers should be able to divide learners into small groups and think of both technological and pedagogical solutions to have them co-constructing an artefact online, taking real time decisions, pooling resources, mashing up collaborative technologies and negotiating meaning (Blin & Appel, 2011; Engeström, 2008. See also Appendix A, Section B)

Some words should be spent on the practice of speaking skills in these communities. Speaking skills are usually underexplored and undervalued due to the technical challenges they entail when designing tasks. Previous literature has suggested site developers design more features such as blogs for improving reading skills, wikis for collaborative writing and video-conferencing tools for the development of speaking skills (Gruba & Clark 2013). However, more recommendations on how to develop learners' speaking skills are needed on the bases of the results of this study. As it emerged during the analysis under the framework of AT, the social and the didactic affordances should work in conjunction. This means that rather than having learners recording their voice while reciting a text in isolation, the system should give learners communicative tasks, which are much more valuable than a simple exercise. Ideally, while learners carry out a communicative task together, the system has to record their synchronous conversation during the performance. This implies that learners are able to listen to the recording several times and develop metalanguage competence on their performance. To have a retrospective perspective on one's performance has a powerful impact on learners because it allows them to remember the incorrect utterance and the repair made by the NS and to be able to retrieve it anytime they wish. Learners should perform communicative tasks together in the chat tool, be able to record their conversations and retrieve them at their own ease.

Among the new initiatives arising in the field of L2 learning and that might be of inspiration for the design of online communities and for telecollaboration, there is the *SpeakApps* platform (<http://www.speakapps.eu>) (see also Chapter 1, section 1.1.3). *SpeakApps* is a European project focused on the creation and development of an open source online platform that gathers language learners, teachers and ICT practitioners. The purpose of the project, as the word itself suggests, is the practice of speaking skills. *SpeakApps* offers solutions in terms of resources, tools and teacher training. The *SpeakApps* platform consists of the following features:

- Open Educational Resources (OER), a growing repository of pedagogical tasks and activities for language learning created by a wide and always expanding community of teachers.
- An online community of teachers and learners based on *Mahara* (<http://mahara.speakapps.org/>), which offers discussion and sharing of ideas.
- *Langblog*, a videoblog used for practicing oral production. Through *Langblog*, which is asynchronous, learners have the possibility to send an audio, video and textual/image contribution. *Langblog* is a particularly valuable tool when the teacher needs to provide feedback to a huge amount of students, when students are asked to formulate their own contribution taking into account the contributions of their peers, when students have to create an artefact in joint collaboration (a chain story, for instance), and when learners need to listen to their past contributions and reflect on their performance and on their previous mistakes.
- *Tandem* is designed to fulfil learners' needs of speaking interaction. It distributes real content (pedagogical tasks) in real time (according to synchronous modalities) to distant students, who have to carry out a task (a "spot the difference" typology, for instance) and solve a problem in joint collaboration focusing on a real communicative goal.
- *Videochat* works synchronously, it is aimed to speaking interaction, and it is used together with *Tandem*. *Videochat* has a recorder (and also a textual chat) and through it learners can record their performance with their partner, as carried out in *Tandem*. The possibility to retrieve one's conversations, foster learners' metalinguistic competence and has a lot of potential for language learning.

These tools are employed at the *Open University of Catalonia* (UOC, Spain) and the studies carried out so far (Appel, 2012; Appel & Borges, 2012; Appel, Robbins, Moré & Mullen, 2012) demonstrate that the *SpeakApps*' tools are promising and innovative.

In the framework of the *SpeakApps* project and by means of the *SpeakApps* platform, a *TandemMOOC*²³ was organized. *TandemMOOC* is a 6-week telecollaborative project focused on the practice of speaking interaction skills and involving learners of Spanish and learners of English (Levels B1/B2/C1) from all over the world. Learners had to interact in tandem in *Moodle*²⁴ by means of the two *SpeakApps* tools devoted to speaking interaction and to synchronous communication: *Videochat* and *Tandem*. Through the *Tandem* tool, they had to carry out different typologies of tandem tasks with their tandem partners. Some of these tasks were designed to prepare and reinforce students' speaking skills to pass the official exams for Spanish and English. The tasks alternated the use of both Spanish and English so that both the partners could perceive that they benefited equally from the tandem interactions. Learners' interconnections were fostered by three types of Tandems (each Tandem was introduced in different weeks throughout the course in order to keep students engaged and to introduce a novelty factor each week):

- *Random Tandem*. The *TandemMOOC* system put students into contact at random in order to practice the TL in Tandem while carrying out Tandem tasks.
- *Pre-arranged Tandem*. Students each week had to agree on a forum or on *Twitter* and *Facebook* on a time and day for carrying out tandem tasks together. Then, employing the *Tandem* tool, one student invited the other to the tandem task.
- *Social Tandem*. Students, after having arranged a meeting, joined this Tandem for a dyadic open conversation without the presence of any pedagogical task.

While students were completing the tandem tasks, the *Videochat* tool was recording their performances and students were able to retrieve them anytime with the aim of reflecting on their previous performances. In addition, at the end of every tandem session, students were asked to provide feedback to their peers before being able to view their own

²³ *TandemMOOC* is the result of the joint collaboration among the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), the University of Barcelona (UB) and the University Rovira i Virgili (URV). It was funded by the AGAUR agency and by the Catalan Government. 2013 Moocs 00017 Agaur, "Spoken Communication. English/Spanish in Tandem", PI Dr. Christine Appel. More information is available here: <http://mooc.speakapps.org/>

²⁴ <http://mooc.speakapps.org/moodle/course/view.php?id=4>

feedback and were periodically requested to fill in a personal portfolio to reflect on their speaking skills throughout the duration of the whole course.

Being the *TandemMOOC* the first innovating experimentation in large scale involving the *SpeakApps* tools, all the actors involved (learners, facilitators, technical team) had to face two main obstacles: (1) the lack of a real online community because the *Moodle* environment did not particularly favour interactions among hundreds of learners and among learners and facilitators (2) the presence of technical problems in relation to the tools. However, the practitioners, organizers and the teachers behind this project, were satisfied with the results obtained since some students were able to reach 20 hours of conversation in a 6-week span, which is not common in a language course (Appel & Pujolà, 2015).

Much more observations, explanations and analysis are needed on the dynamics, on the affordances and on the constraints of such an innovative project, but in the context of this thesis this is not possible. The *SpeakApps* project and the *TandemMOOC* experimentation have been chosen here as examples of new initiatives, with the expectation that these practices might raise more awareness and give new insights to online developers and experts in the field about the proper design of a learning environment for L2 learning. This same experimentation carried out by practitioners, developers, entrepreneurs who can count on a solid economic budget to ensure the stability and reliability of the platform, would empower lifelong language learners and their non-formal practices in online communities a great deal.

On the basis of these arguments, this thesis offers suggestions for an eventual upgrade of the design features of online communities for L2 learning. It would be opportune that these online communities, at being non-formal environments, combine the social interactions typical of in class settings with the social networking features that they intrinsically possess, in line with the idea of “bridging activities” (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008).

The following table is based on the distinction between social interactions and social networking in the field of CALL, as debated by Lamy and Zourou (2013).

Table 5.1 Social interactions vs social networking (adapted from Lamy & Zourou, 2013)

| Social interactions | Social Networking |
|---|--|
| Through Internet technologies Pedagogical interventions in online spaces (forums, groups, classrooms, etc.). | Through social media Natural open-ended conversations outside class |
| Pedagogical tasks Between students, between students and teachers and between “invited others” (experts, NSs of the L2, etc.). | No tasks Informal and with anybody |
| Within the walls of a F2F classroom Within the constraints of the task scenario in a closed circuit. | Beyond the F2F classroom In an open space |
| Institution | No institution |

The social networking features, as Lamy and Zourou (2013) states, are “pillars” (p.4) and define SNSs. Basing on Musser et al. (2006:5), these features are “user participation”, which implies user generating, mixing and reusing content, “openness”, which refers to the horizontal structure of these environments and to the fact that they are not confined to a classroom wall or to a VLE (Virtual Learning Environment), and “network effects” referring to the increasing value of the online information in a way that is directly proportional to the number of users who shares it and uses it. These communities potentially have these characteristics and the chat is their best representative tool of social networking and all the elements listed in the right column of the table.

But, a novelty element should be introduced: this element are the pedagogical tasks that teachers commonly use for their L2 practices in SNSs environments and that might seem somewhat unusual to be applied to such environments. These communities also present elements that resemble formal environments, for this reason we cannot only talk about informal learning but we should state that they have modalities typical of non-formal learning environments. But these elements, the didactic units and the focus on form exercises, have proved not to work well. That is why, the designers of these communities, together with language teachers who are expert of TBLT, could gain from adding collaborative pedagogical tasks as a novelty factor. These tasks should be applied to the tool chat in synchronous interaction with other learners, in modalities similar to those of *TandemMOOC*. In other words, the chat tools should have a two-fold function: the one of connecting people at random for chatting in absence of topics and tasks (as the *Tandem*

MOOC did with the “Social Tandem”), which is a feature that online communities already have despite the impossibility to record students’ performances, but also the function of connecting people for social networking and then carrying out a task together (as in the case of Random Tandem and Pre-arranged Tandem in the *TandemMOOC* experience).

In contrast with the aforementioned pedagogical and technological recommendations, it is necessary to underscore that one of the online communities of this study, *Livemocha*, has been subjected to several changes that seem not to have taken into consideration the contributions and suggestions expressed by previous literature. Some of these suggestions regard the need to strengthen the sense of community, the design of learning tasks, learners’ profile customization, technical support and a greater use of SCMC (Lin, 2012).

One of the major changes affecting the platform regards peer feedback. As Harrison (2013) underscores, at the basis of these communities there is the principle that learners want to be connected and provide each other reciprocal support, regardless of whether the other person is an expert teacher. As this thesis has shown, to learners it is important that the support is given by a NS and that this NS is reliable and provides them with adequate feedback. A problem of peer feedback was that there was no control of its quality because it was learner generated content. In order to overcome this problem, the platform has introduced the feature of the expert review, which is alienating because it marks a distance between learners and the rest of the community and poses an obstacle to peer assistance and tandem language learning (Harrison, 2013). Currently in *Livemocha* only expert learners of the community can provide a complete and hyper textual feedback (involving text and audio features). The feedback that all the other users can give is simply rating learners’ submission (number of stars). On the one hand, this is supposed to enhance the quality of the feedback, on the other hand it is detrimental for learners’ interactions and learning of peer assistance strategies because it generates a negative feeling of detachment. Moreover, in *Livemocha* there used to be editing tools for feedback provision such as editing text colours, crossing errors in case of mistakes and peers had the possibility of providing audio comments, which was one of the most engaging features because it was one of the closest forms to etandem. These features are not currently available.

Another crucial problem concerns learner generated content. When this study was carried out learner generated content was the creation of flashcards, the translations of the didactic resources made by the rest of the community, learners exercises submitted to the community and the revisions to the exercises made by their peers. At the moment in *Livemocha*, the only flashcards available are those provided by *Rosetta Stone* in the didactic materials; the translations of the didactic resources is automatically made by Google Translate; it is not possible to browse learners' profiles and see their activities and exercises submitted unless the platform asks the NS to revise someone's submission in the NS's language; complete revisions (audio and written comments) to the exercises are only made by expert reviewers and a common user can only rate and/or leave a textual comment without interacting orally. This issue is strictly related to the ephemerality of data (Zourou, 2013). When this study was carried out, in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* there were little customization settings and, independently of befriending a language partner, it was possible to see the other users' activities and the feedback received by the NSs. This feature is not currently available in *Livemocha*. Beyond the ethical implications that this aspect implies for the researcher which is in contrast with the strict terms of contract of these communities (Zourou, 2013) (see also 5.3.1), the possibility conceded to learners to browse among all the users of the community and reflect on their language activities has a powerful learning potential because it allows them to activate metalanguage competence.

The results of this study showed that another important aspect to improve concerns the design of these communities, which should be more user-friendly and intuitive to navigate and should have more precise and accurate information design, that is, more accuracy of the content when translating didactic materials. This is in line with previous literature (Liu et al., 2015). The translations of the communities are user generated content, which means that they are made by users who are not qualified language teachers. In the current version, *Livemocha's* translations are made by Google translate, which makes the community an aseptic and impersonal context for learning.

The next section addresses lifelong learners wishing to make the most out of their language experience in online communities.

5.2.2. Pedagogical recommendations for L2 learners

This study demonstrates that the creation of opportunities for TL use is not entirely dependent on learners because the sociocultural context surrounding them plays a key role. Given the influence of the social environment, guidelines should be given to students when they have to inhabit this environment and interact in it.

As chapter 3 has revealed (see 3.2.3 and 3.3.4), learners are conscious that one of the main features of online communities is learner generated content. On the one hand, this is a positive aspect because it contributes to convey the feeling of community and joint collaboration. On the other hand, learners were aware of the fact that imperfections and inaccuracies might be present in the translations of the didactic content and, as a consequence, in the automatic revision of the structured exercises. In the current version of *Livemocha*, learner generated content is not available in any form. Independently of the changes occurred, an autonomous learner, aware of these issues, should not fully rely on the platforms and, in case of doubts and ambiguities, s/he should know the strategies to enact inside or outside the community to find a solution to a possible language problem.

An important aspect learners should take into account revolves around the empathy and sensitivity they should manifest towards their language partners, which are skills that lifelong learners should train. Learners have to practice polite strategies (such as emotional support, backchannelling words, use of emoticons) to maintain the intersubjectivity between the interlocutors and understand the difficulties of their peers in using the TL, as the analysis of the online interactions in chapter 4 has shown. This means to be conscious of the different connotations that a word might have in a language or in another and that the perception of the NS differs from the perception of the learner. Another skill to practice is to be sensitive to the cultural differences (with reference to turn-taking, for instance).

Therefore, based on the results of this thesis (see the analysis of the online interviews in chapter 3 and the analysis of learners' online interactions in chapter 4) and on the positive experience of *TandemMOOC* (Appel & Pujolà, 2015) reported in this study (see 5.2.1), the recommendations for lifelong language learners are as follows:

During the conversations, learners should adjust the interaction to their interlocutor adapting their L1 to the tandem partner (careful use of slang, adjustment of the speed of the speech to the conversational episode, avoidance of the over use of the teacher language). With regard to the adjust interaction issue, learners have to value the importance of pronunciation and of respecting dialects and varieties in the accent. If necessary, during the interaction learners should spend some words about their geographical provenience and explain the characteristics of their accent. During the social interaction, the two learners are involved in a constant and collaborative process of negotiation, where they have to be capable of facing competing goals and also developing the pragmatic competence. They have to negotiate meaning, learn if and how to interrupt according to the situation, adopt mitigation strategies and hedging, be able to express and defend clearly their point of view, acquire the right formulas for greetings, stating and asking for opinions. About the strategies for oral interaction, learners should be able to plan in advance the content of their speech taking into account the effect of their message on the interlocutor. They should be able to adjust the register to the situational context, to adjust the intonation and volume of his speech to the situation, to make a correct use of syntactic connectors to organize the ongoing discourse, to adopt code-switching effectively, to make a wise use of stock phrases while organizing the ongoing discourse, to self-repair and be aware of possible misunderstandings.

In relation to peer assistance, both in the case of the exercise submission and correction and in the case of informal online interactions in the chat tool, learners have to be aware that the other learners, who are teachers of their TL, not only are not necessarily NSs of this language but also are not real expert of language teaching and do not possess a pedagogical background. Before the interaction, the learner should inform in advance his/her language partners about his/her weaknesses and strengths in the TL and should communicate clearly how s/he wants to be helped. In turn, the learner has to find out how to help properly the language partner. In order to make this possible, it is necessary that learners start reflecting on their learning skills and on what they want to achieve in relation to the improvement in the TL before the online practice (fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, morphologic doubts, etc). Moreover, defining social roles is a crucial aspect for both the tandem partners. Before starting the conversation, learners should agree on their role of expert and novice throughout the conversation and ensure that their partners are willing to be corrected in order not to hurt their sensitivity if a repair sequence is

launched. Learners should also agree on possible preferences in relation to the nature of peer-feedback (if they want the feedback to be focused on a specific aspect related to their language process, if they accept repair even though the social trajectory is interrupted, if they accept comments on one's performance).

When learners seek for assistance, they should be aware that their identity is constantly at stake and that there is an affective filter preventing them from doing so in case of misunderstandings during the conversation. Learners should train to overcome these affective barriers and be able to activate repair, asking for clarification and verification checks and suggesting an effective NS's corrective feedback. When learners seek for assistance and manifest the problem to their interlocutor politely, they make the repair easier for him and the flow of the conversation can be established again. In addition, they should be conscious that the way they respond to online assistance will shape next conversations with their interlocutor.

With regard to assistance provision, learners should take into consideration the difference between an explicit and an implicit feedback and that the former is emotionally more intrusive and dangerous than the latter. The issue of sensitivity and empathy is crucial when connected to peer-feedback. Learners have to be aware that when they bear the role of experts, they have to avoid an overcorrective feedback because this interrupts the flow of the conversation and interferes negatively with their partner's identity as a proficient learner of the TL. In the case of SCMC in a textual chat, learners should not forget about the importance of the textual chat as an aid to understand the interactional event and to help peers. Since it has a visual input, the textual chat favours noticing (in the case of spelling mistakes for instance) and the possibility to retrieve previous conversations for metalinguistic purposes. Instead, in the case of oral conversation, learners should contemplate the possibility of recording their performance and listen to it later.

At the end of the interaction, learners should practice their metalanguage competence and reflect on the conversational episodes asking for the collaboration of their language partner and for feedback on his performance. Learners should then reflect on their own on their fluency, mistakes, on their emotional status on the interference of their L1, and on possible ways to improve their performance also taking into account their tandem partner's suggestions and their tandem partner's performance to grasp new vocabulary

and structures and to improve the pronunciation (in the case of oral conversations) and the use of specific native-like expressions. A language learning diary, for instance, would be a valuable tool.

5.2.3. Pedagogical recommendations for teachers

This section is addressed to teachers wishing to start L2 telecollaboration practices in online communities for L2 learning. This section describes the pedagogical environment, the obstacles that teachers have to face and possible ways to cope with them.

In the online communities analyzed for the investigation (*Livemocha* and *Busuu*), the didactic tools are made of lessons that consist of structured exercises that are automatically corrected. These form-focused exercises consist of pattern drills and lists of words to memorize and to combine based on the stimulus-response model belonging to the audio-lingual structural approach. Under the lens of AT (Engeström, 1987), it is possible to maintain that the old audio-lingual approach seems to be “in tension” and not to work in synergy with the idea of online community itself and with the search of interaction with peers, which corresponds to more communicative and task-based approaches.

The only form of connection between the tools and the community is this: at the end of any exercise related to “writing” and “speaking” skills, learners are asked to submit the exercise done for peer revision and, in exchange, to give feedback to other learners’ exercises. Learners are given two possibilities: they can both submit the exercise to one of their contacts and/or submit it at random to someone in the community. In addition, the exercise for the practice of speaking skills in the communities consist in learner reciting (and at the same time recording) an excerpt of text individually in the TL and then sending it to the rest of the community. In the best of the cases, when the learner receives the feedback by the NS of his/her TL, he has to listen to the same excerpt of text recited by the NS’s voice. If the NS is able to provide adequate feedback, he will read the text slowly, he will stress and recast two or three times the words that were mispronounced and he will add some notes and useful tips either in a written form or orally in that same recording. Results revealed that this good practice of peer feedback was not uncommon and is an indicator of the fact that in these communities there are autonomous learners who are aware of what peer assistance implies and of what the principle of reciprocity is. But results also showed that not all learners are able (or willing) to provide

a good feedback. To this regard, chapter 3 showed some learners' dissatisfaction for the type of feedback received and also proved that a poor or missing feedback is a cause of drop-out in the platform. For students continue to inhabit the platforms, consider it as a learning environment and maintain their feeling of belonging to a community, the teacher and the students must provide peer support and feedback to supplement the feedback received online (Liu et al., 2013). Therefore, teacher who consider to employ these online communities for telecollaboration practices, should take these aspects into account and provide their students with a set of guidelines on how to give (and also receive) feedback in the case of peer revision of *Livemocha* and *Busuu* exercise. Together with this aspect, Liu et al. (2015) also underline that teacher should monitor learners' students constantly and support their learning with other resources.

In addition, as already explained in section 5.2.1, the learners of these communities should be given the opportunity to use the TL through tasks that mirror real-life situations; they should be given a real and practical reason to communicate in a synchronous way and through a real communicative goal. These tasks have to work in conjunction and in synergy with the chat tool to mediate the relationship between the learner and the rest of the community of learners. In this way, rather than being subject-centred and aiming at the transformation of single individuals, these communities need a more object-centred focus, in line with a TBLT approach. Basically, learners' activities should be oriented towards the collaborative creation of an artifact (Blin, 2010), which fosters learner autonomy and expansive learning (Blin 2005, 2010).

The role of the teachers in such environments still needs further research (Harrison, 2013) and this study can only in part address this issue. In these environments, learners work at their own pace with their peers. If the context shifts to the use of these online communities in a formal classroom, the teacher has to ensure that interaction occurs and has to be a facilitator for learners setting his own goals through pedagogical tasks starting from the pattern drills exercises. In addition, for more sustained and more meaningful interactions in informal settings, it is necessary that teachers provide guidance to learners (Liaw & English, 2013). For instance, before starting practices in the online communities, the teacher should explain what tandem language learning is and its basic principles, s/he should also offer a list of good pedagogical practices on how students should offer

assistance to each other and a list of technical good practices on the correct use of the technological affordances of these online platforms.

5.3. Conclusive arguments

The next sections deal with the important ethical issues at stake when this study was conducted and how the ethical procedures adopted made a contribution to the research field of online communities; then, the final part of the chapter deals with the limitations of the study and with the suggestions for further research.

5.3.1. Ethical considerations

As Zimmer (2010) posits, “Concerns over consent, privacy and anonymity do not disappear simply because subjects participate in online social networks; rather, they become even more important” (p. 324). Following this consideration and also the fact that members of the online communities which were the object of study could resist being studied, to follow ethical procedures has been an important issue implicated since the very beginning of this investigation. In addition, the vulnerability and the sensitivity of the category of the people under study, being language learners gradually shaping their identity in the L2, had to receive considerable consideration.

Another aspect to consider, as Kozinets (2010) points out, is that the e-researcher works in a very new and evolving context where a common set of well-defined criteria for the web is still lacking among researchers, who usually tend to adapt pre-web models. However, these models are not always able to cover all the ethical peculiarities and characteristics related to web-based research. For the purpose of this research, all the appropriate precautions to protect the participants of the study have been taken in order to respect their privacy, confidentiality, self-determination and autonomy, being aware of sensitive data such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, country of origin, disability, religion, sexual orientation, language and economic status.

In particular, there are four main difficult issues at stake listed by Kozinets (2010) that have been taken into account: (1) to seek information about the community under study by reading the terms of contract, which in some cases can be quite prohibitive in terms of content sharing and copyright rights; this was the case with *Livemocha* and *Busuu*, the communities selected for this investigation (2) to gain voluntary informed consent from

online community members asking for permission; (3) to avoid harm to online community members gaining informed consent and cloaking their identities when using data. To this regard, I decided to opt for a medium cloaked degree of concealment (Bruckman, 2002) according to which it is possible to name the community under study, but not real names, pseudonyms and direct verbatim quotes; (4) citing and crediting when collecting netnographic data related to the participants.

In relation to point 1, as Zourou (2013) discussed, it is necessary to underline that in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* there is ambiguity between their very restricted terms of contact that prevent even researchers from re-using data, and very open and public data displayed on users' profile. At the time when this study was conducted, learners' profiles and their activities in these communities were public and there were no customization settings to hide users' data (currently, in the new version of *Livemocha*, the data about learners' activities are hidden, with the important implications already mentioned in 5.2.1). The usage of the data displayed on users' public profiles was not strictly necessary for this investigation but I needed to contact the community managers to obtain statistical data about the communities. In particular, I needed to know approximately how many users connected to the platforms on a regular basis before sending the online survey, then, I also asked for their aid for the submission of this survey. When the administrators of both these communities were contacted, the statistical data were not granted. When I asked for aid in the submission of the online questionnaire (see chapter 3, section 3.2.1), *Livemocha* offered to collaborate and gave its support, *Busuu* did not concede it. Therefore, the online survey was submitted to *Livemocha's* users. Finally, all the sensitive data deriving from the online survey and the online interviews and the data of the online interactions of the case studies were treated to protect and hide the participants' identities.

With respect to issues 2, 3 and 4, decisions that might have altered and influenced every aspect of the study were made. In order to gain implied consent, for example, the researcher had to disclose herself, never deceive the users of the communities and explain clearly what she was investigating; this altered the method to use, the type of questions to pursue and the type of community that is the object of this study. The disclosure of the researcher's identity into these communities could have altered some of the responses received also because my presence might have been considered invading.

In the phase of naturalistic observation of the online L2 communities, when the researcher inhabited the communities as an L2 learner and explored the communities' affordances, learners' level of individual disclosure and exposure was very low, since she had few interactions with participants (it was limited to the online feedback to the submission that the researcher and the other learners provided online to each other) and there was no disclosure of personal information for the purpose of the study. Therefore, it was not necessary to adopt particular codes of conduct or strict ethical measures.

In contrast, in the later phases, the researcher had to take the appropriate steps to protect the identity of the participants in any publications or documentation of the study. She adopted an anonymity agreement in the phase of the online survey and a confidentiality agreement in the interview and in the case-study analysis phases. In the case of the online survey, the survey was anonymous and was sent by email to the sample selected, therefore the participants' identities were not revealed to the researcher. In the case of the interview and case study phases, important steps tailored to the needs of the participants of the study were taken to keep their identities confidential, such as the use of pseudonyms and the cloaking of any unique type of information that could identify the subjects.

With respect to the confidentiality issue, the researcher dealt with the obtainment of the informed consent from online participants by following the normal protocol. The informed consent was firstly submitted to an expert in research ethics and later sent as an online form to the interviewees with the intention of making clear the researcher's identity, the aim of the study and the privacy safeguard of the participants. Hence, as shown in the Appendix D, in the consent form the purpose of the study was explained, the participants' expectations clarified, the eventual benefits for the interviewees were outlined, a description of the researcher, her contact and a link to her online webpage was provided, the process in use to maintain confidentiality was explained, how the data would be secured and for how long, and when and how the study would be disseminated. Finally, it was explicitly mentioned that participants could withdraw from the project at any moment. Then, the researcher asked for the explicit permission of recording the interviews and treating the data obtained for conferences and publications included the quotations from the transcriptions and the online interaction corpus data.

Informants were invited to sign it and to submit it either electronically or in paper format. Since a signature authenticates consent and digital signature requires a more complicated process, the researcher mentioned to the participants that both the electronic and the paper format would be accepted but that the latter was preferred. However, even though the web form signature does not have the same legal value as a signed consent form, it is still deemed acceptable (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003). The informed consent was shown to the participants before every interview and was sent by email or as a *Skype* attachment in the case of online interviews or presented as a paper version in face-to-face interviews. No participant did refuse to submit the informed consent although a minority forgot to do it. In this case, the investigator considered the brief exchange occurred on the textual chat she had with each one of them before every interview as a proof of their willingness to participate, since during this exchange she introduced the informed consent and tackled all the points mentioned above obtaining positive answers from the participants.

With regard to the participants' online interactions in *Skype*, in the online communities' chats or in any other public online chat, similar ethical measures were taken. After having consulted the AoIR (Association of Internet Researchers) ethical guide (Ess, 2002), that recognizes the challenges of applying ethical principles to the online fieldwork, the researcher asked the case studies and their conversational partners for the informed consent. The participants had to inform their conversational partners about the investigation by showing the informed consent and the researcher's personal page, which explained about the project, before submitting any type of textual, audio or video recording. But this procedure did not always achieve positive results. As the participants reported, in some occasions individuals decided to opt out because they were reluctant to being studied and suspicious to give their online conversations to casual "language partners" who were collaborating in a study. However, in the majority of cases this procedure proved to work well. The case studies were specifically trained how to approach their conversational partners and triggered their curiosity about the project and its possible pedagogical benefits.

5.3.2. *Main contributions and final remarks*

This study provided further contributions to several fields of knowledge: to the design of social L2 learning environments, to the adoption of the AT approach to look at online

communities, to the field of telecollaboration, to the field of SCMC, to the complex field of language selection, and to the new ethical issues and problems in the field of online ethnography.

In relation to the design of social L2 learning environments, this study suggested to restructure the online communities taking into account a synergic interplay between the social and the didactic affordances, also reporting as examples new initiatives in L2 learning field.

With regard to the learning paradigm of AT, it represented the theoretical underpinnings of the social spaces analysed in this thesis after Chotel (2012). AT proved to be a powerful tool to show how to turn obstacles into opportunities for L2 learning in these online communities. This framework can be used for future research, for the design of adequate learning tasks and of effective language learning environments. This study aimed to be a contribution involving both CALL researchers and the designers of the communities for L2 learning on how to take the best advantage of the potential of these environments for more meaningful and enriching informal telecollaborative practices. The environment of online communities represents a challenge to the researcher involved in the field because it is complex and hard to grasp, it merges the online and the offline world and it is a hybrid between formal, non-formal and informal processes. Since CHAT offers complex methodological and conceptual tool that are suitable to the complexity of such environments, its application should occur more frequently and be experimented further.

In relation to telecollaboration, this thesis offered a better understanding of the social aspect of L2 learning by drawing on learners' spontaneous conversations in out-of-class contexts. This study has shown that peer feedback occurs even though it is not pedagogically motivated. Chapter 4, in particular, has illustrated that online environments have a potential for learners located in distance places to engage in naturalistic repair trajectories. It also emerged that both learners have to collaborate with each other in order not to lose the intersubjectivity between them.

This study provides further insights to longitudinal studies in SCMC based in particular on online communities created for language learning in informal settings. It adds more insights on interlanguage pragmatics following Gonzales's (2012) study and shows how

autonomous students are able to cope with both the social and the learning trajectory during the interactions. One of the important findings of this study is the frequency with which learners initiate repair on the basis of a vocabulary issue. This is in line with previous literature (Tudini, 2010). This study is a further confirmation that SCMC chats are favourable environments for learning new vocabulary in the TL and for the development of intercultural and pragmatic competence. In relation to spontaneous conversation and the absence of a TBLT, this study proved that spontaneous, free conversations have a potential for lifelong L2 learners in informal online settings. However, the absence of topics was a common problem reported by the interviewees during the interview phase of the study and experienced in first person by the researcher herself during the ethnographic exploration of the online platforms. The pedagogical implication of this finding is that free, spontaneous conversations should be combined with formal, TBLT approaches more typical of in-class settings because this produces more negotiation of meaning between the learners involved.

In relation to the code-switching area, this study has provided insights into how lifelong learners interact in SCMC and in the informal/non-formal context of online communities for L2 learning showing different typologies of data (audio/textual) and different conversational situations (NS with NNS and NNS with NNS). This analysis revealed that code-switching is employed in particular as a mediational tool to organize de ongoing conversation and for learners to start repair in their TL and to create opportunities to use it, which is in line with Kurata's (2011) findings. This research also found that very little code-switching is possible if learners' level in their respective TL differs.

This study offered a reflection on the application of ethical rules to the online communities under study, which is an issue left underexplored in previous research (Zourou, 2013). When dealing with the data generated by learners in the online communities for L2 learning, given their restricted terms of contract, the methodology adopted for this investigation were contacting the community managers in order to obtain their support, preparing an informed consent for the participants of the investigation and treating sensitive data in such a way to protect their identities. These procedural steps are expected to help future researcher wishing to gain more insights on the dynamics of these communities.

In relation to online ethnography, there are several reflections to make. Throughout the investigation, I tried to maintain openness and communication with participants, especially with the case studies selected. I found that an easy way to gather meaningful data is to put the participants at their own ease, avoiding asking immediately the questions of the interviews and establishing an informal and friendly conversational tone. I decided to set this type of conversational tone between the participants and me since I contacted them the first time by email adopting a more informal writing style rather than academic. Moreover, I adapted register and vocabulary to the people according to their level of education and to their level of formality. The first minutes are crucial to understand the language and the culture of the target participants and to consequently adapt to them.

As a researcher, I showed that I had familiarity with the participants' experience in the community adapting to their culture, values and use of language in order to assist communication during the interview. This was crucial especially in the case of those interviews that did not occur face-to-face or through the video-call, where paralinguistic clues (body language and facial expressions) help both interviewer and interviewee. When interviewing through textual based communication, as an interviewer, I had to pay attention to a conscious use of emoticons, which have the function of replacing the lack of paralinguistic clues.

Another fundamental issue encountered during the process was gaining trust from the participants, which is considered to be particularly difficult to obtain and to preserve in online interviews depending on participants' attitudes towards technology and the researcher's environment (James & Busher, 2009). I tried to maintain trust during the interview by using open dialogue and being spontaneous and I found the easiest way to solve technical problems of some interviewees who were less familiar with *Skype*. The ethnographic fieldwork in some occasions involved an extensive collaboration with the case studies and led to the establishment of trust relationships, which often went beyond the purpose of the study. Some of the case studies had the tendency to consider the researcher as a personal friend and this posed some ethical problems about up to what extent the researcher had to expose her person (for instance, sending friend requests in *Facebook* and in *Skype* personal account).

The fieldwork conducted for this study made me realise the importance for the researcher to declare her own identity and that the subjects had the right to know that I was an investigator, as other researchers have experimented (Estalella & Ardèvol, 2007). The case studies established firm relationships with me and were highly aware of their role up to the point that they turned into personal collaborators mine, even after that the collaboration was over and the researcher was already providing to the dissemination of the results.

Throughout the process of investigation, I received from the interviewees an endless number of links to online language learning material, online language groups considered worthy of analysis and web or phone applications for language learning. This is a further confirmation of the importance of building an interactive online presence with the people under study by means of the same tools and practices under study (Estalella & Ardèvol, 2007), and through which the study was conducted, which in this case were the L2 online communities, the researcher's *Skype* personal account and other popular SNSs. In this sense, these tools have contributed greatly to the establishment of trust relationships and also an important means for increasing socialization between the researcher and the case studies. As a researcher, these online practices of investigation represented a valid and challenging learning tool to understand in first person how to draw and handle the fuzzy boundaries between private and public, ethical and unethical, formal and informal in online ethnography. The establishment of symmetric relationship of mutuality with the subjects of the investigation revealed to be of primary importance to build trust with the subjects of the investigations and depended much on the researcher's sensitivity and use of common sense (Estalella & Ardèvol, 2007).

The majority of the interviewees conceded me an online interview through *Skype* and became personal *Skype* contacts across all the phases of the investigation (phase 4—online interviews, phase 5—submission of the online interactions, phase 6—recall interviews). *Skype* allowed me flexibility with the arrangement of an exact time for the interviews and allowed me to remain in contact with the case studies for the submission of the online interactions. Throughout the interview phase, several observations about the methodological and procedural advantages and disadvantages encountered arose. As a researcher, I annotated these observations in a research diary. I decided to report this information

in this thesis in view of that fact that it could inform and help other researchers in the field (See Appendix H).

Across the study, some limitations, blind spots and missteps also emerged.

In relation to the survey, a limitation of this study was the omission of a strategy to attract more respondents. A useful strategy, for example, would be the provision of incentives to those learners who received the invitations to take the survey. The researcher should have agreed with the company on a more effective invitational email, for instance one with the inclusion of an electronic gift (free access to a more advanced course for which you normally pay a fee) for those who decided to reply the survey soon. Another misstep consisted in not mentioning a cut-off date (this was known to the researcher) when inviting members in order to better motivate respondents and in not delivering an introductory email anticipating the arrival of a survey in the following days in order to prepare them and to gain their attention.

A limitation of text-based interviews is that participants are in charge of the onerous task of writing the responses by themselves. On the one hand, this saved a lot of time in the phase of the transcription but, on the other hand, the amount of data obtained was less in comparison with interviews carried out through verbal communication. This is especially true in the case of asynchronous text-based interviews conducted by email.

In relation to the interviews and the case studies, it is possible that students, in friending me in *Skype*, *Livemocha*, *Busuu* and other common SNS and not necessarily for the purposes of the research, or immediately after the exchanges occurred during the interview, actually altered their normal patterns of online behaviour because they knew they were studied and under observation. For my part, I tried to minimize my impact on the online space I was studying and on the online spaces I used in order to be in contact with them by observing their behaviours, never posting, commenting or indicating my online presence. As already explained in Chapter 2 (section 2.4.2), this is the typical and inevitable drawback when an interpretative framework and the methodology is adopted. Similarly, in relation to the ethical measures adopted, the open disclosure of the researcher's presence and the informed consent explaining the purpose of the research, might have inevitably biased the results of the study. In addition, for clear ethical reasons, detailed and

potentially important information about the case studies' language partners is not available.

This study was longitudinal in the sense that learners were interviewed at a time distance in order to elicit more information about their level of engagement to the platforms over time. However, with reference to learners' submission of their online conversations, a limitation is not to have studied learners in an extended arch of time. Although I sought to adequately capture and describe learners' experiences in *Livemocha* and *Busuu*, this study is not longitudinal for what concerns the collection of online learners' interactions, and therefore, only presents a detailed snapshot of learning practice during a limited amount of time.

Another misstep of this investigation is related to the recall interview phase. A crucial factor related to this type of interviews is time. The arch of time between the speech episode and the recall interview should be minimized as much as possible in order for the interviewee to recall as many details as possible (Gass & Mackey, 2000). In the case of this study, the reduction of time distance has not always been possible and some case studies have not been shown the transcriptions of their interactions immediately after the interactional event; as a consequence, in some cases it was difficult for them to recall the episode. Another problem derived from the fact that learners intertwined multiple conversations with partners that they often had met just once or twice and sometimes it was difficult to remember the person they had the conversation with. However, time distance in some cases was useful to verify whether learning occurred after the speech event that gave rise to the language problem. In some cases learners were able to recall the conversational event and the nature of the mistake, and to recast promptly the correct language form provided by the NS after many months, which might demonstrate that learning occurred. It would not be possible to make the same claim if the recall interview was carried out a few days or a week later.

5.3.3. Directions for future research

As the research work for this dissertation progressed, more areas deserving further investigation emerged. To begin with, these results inform the non-formal learning field and contribute to the improvement of the environments for self-directed learning. But, in part the results also inform the realm of formal education. Future research should

insist on the idea of “bridging activities” (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008) between the SCMC occurring in out-of-class informal settings and the learning activities taking place in the formal context of the language classroom.

To this regard, it would be useful, for instance, to apply AT to telecollaboration initiatives in *Livemocha* and *Busuu* occurring in formal contexts. In the same context, it would be interesting to see the role played by the teacher in relation to learners’ learning process, being the teacher a facilitator of this self-directed learning on the online communities. The teacher would play the role of a guide who motivates students, triggers their curiosity towards the TL and culture and would be a tutor in relation to technical problems.

Similarly, in future research about informal contexts (as in the case of this study) and about informal exchanges in these online communities, future researchers should introduce a variation and prepare a set of topics or pedagogical tasks addressed to the learners investigated to use in their online interactions.

An important aspect open to future research and in line with the aforementioned issues, is related to the pedagogical tasks. As results showed, motivation and engagement to these online communities are key-issues depending on the main tools of these environments, that is, the focus on form exercises and the chat. Both these tools presented problems. On the one hand, the focus on form exercises gradually generated boredom, poor quality of submissions, negligence and disengagement in students, on the other hand, the chat use was compromised by technical constraints, by learners’ difficulty at finding adequate language partners and by the common problem of learners not being able to find adequate topics to talk about during their conversations. Some of the learners underlined that, during their interactions, they discussed common topics (age, education, country) and then the interest for conversation tended to decrease. Future research in the field should introduce some changes and investigate learners’ SCMC activities with their peers after the submission of communicative tasks. Starting from the study by Lin et al. (2015), more research is needed on what type of communicative tasks can be designed and how they can be implemented within the platform context.

Another potential area of investigation is related to language selection. Future research should insist on what defines learners' code-switching and should focus on the differences in the code-switching between the dyadic conversations between NS/NNS and NNS/NNS. In addition, future research should also focus on the differences in code-switching according to the typology of interaction (textual/audio) and should shed more light on the similarities and differences between informal face-to-face interactions and informal SCMC interactions.

A possible direction for further research would be about technical and usability issues in relation to these sites in order to determine which design features are most suitable and helpful to language learners.

Another area deserving future work concerns language use and language acquisition. Time and contextual constraints prevented an analysis of the above. The corpus data analyzed is restricted to a limited number of case studies. In future studies, an accurate analysis should be expanded to more case studies and interactional episodes, collect interactional data over a longer period of time and identify learners' improvements to assess if acquisition occurs.

Finally, the use of AT as a conceptual framework for the exploration of the dynamics and the internal contradictions of online communities designed for L2 learning, proved to be effective not only for the interpretation of the relationships between learners and their surrounding online environment, but also for the analysis of learners' strategies and choices during the interactions. Future researchers should insist on the application of AT to online communities and improve the analysis of the present work.

Conclusions

“Knowledge of languages is the doorway to wisdom.”

–Roger Bacon

This doctoral dissertation was conducted under an interpretative paradigm, following a longitudinal multiple case study approach in order to investigate lifelong language learners in online communities. The study aimed to elicit learners’ perceptions about their L2 learning experience in the online platforms and showed concrete examples of peer assistance occurring among them. The research adopted a mixed-methods approach with a mainly qualitative component to investigate the system of the online communities at both a macro (the platform structure) and micro level (learners’ online interactions). Overall, the research advanced an understanding of how learners construct opportunities for language use within the environment of online communities.

Chapter 1 contextualized the study and described the new possibilities opened to language learning with the arrival of the network society, taking into account informal learning contexts in particular. The chapter, then, provided a general review of both formal and informal educational practises within online communities and introduced the terminology adopted in the thesis with the definition of SNSs and online communities. It then examined the concept of social network in tighter relationship with the L2 learning field. Hence, it focused on the current scenario of online social networks and communities on three different levels: telecollaboration practices, L2 learning practices in SNSs, and L2 learning practices in SNSs designed specifically for L2 learning.

Chapter 2 reviewed the theoretical bases of the thesis, consisting in a holistic approach drawing on sociocultural theory combined with AT and post-structural perspectives, in conjunction with Auer’s model of bilingual interaction, following Kurata’s (2011) study. This chapter also discussed further the objectives of the thesis and addressed the research questions. Then, it explained the methodological choices driving the investigation, the paradigm in use and the case study as a research method and it described the methodological phases of the study.

Chapter 3 explored the current scenario of online communities for L2 learning, it described the communities selected for the investigation and it reported the first ethnographic observations about them. Hence, it analysed the data obtained from the survey interpretation and from the interviews submitted to the online language learners inhabiting these communities.

Chapter 4 analysed each case study and some relevant extracts from their online spontaneous conversations (both audio recordings and textual chat) in the TL. The chapter tackled fundamental issues such as the type of assistance occurring in the ZPD between learners, the social roles played by the learners, and the norms established within the community, under the lens of AT. Simultaneously, it compared and contrasted learners' different strategies to construct opportunities for the use of the TL.

Finally, Chapter 5, drawing on the analysis of the survey, the interviews and the online interaction data, brought together the results obtained. The chapter answered the research questions and then, according to the final deliveries, it provided recommendations on how to turn obstacles into opportunities for L2 learning in these online communities, with a view to their pedagogical improvement. To conclude, it discussed the main contributions of the thesis as well as its limitations, suggesting directions for further research.

To my knowledge, this study is one of the few longitudinal studies about SCMC and informal interactions in online communities relying on a naturalistic corpus data and occurring in an out-of-class setting. To elicit the direct experience of learners of online communities by means of semi-structured interviews and by the analysis of their online conversations has proved to be a valuable way to largely enrich our understanding of these environments and of what is occurring. In addition, the in-depth examination of language selection at both micro (micro-interactional factors, code-alternation in the online conversations) and macro levels (the surrounding environment in online social networks) gave the possibility to explore those factors that contribute to the difficulties experienced by learners in constructing opportunities for L2 use and learning in online communities.

The results of this study generate two final reflections. The first regards learners' socialization and creation of opportunities to use the TL, the second regards the role played by online communities as hybrid environments for these opportunities to be created, where formal, informal and non-formal are intermingled.

In relation to the first aspect, this study provided a better understanding of how socialization works and how learners create opportunities for learning. It also showed that if learners are immersed in an adequate sociocultural context, they can co-construct their L2 use and learning experience. The students of this study took advantage of the pervasiveness of social media and of the informal conditions of learning to have dyadic spontaneous interactions. Students in general showed to be able to use code-switching strategically so that both sides of the tandem partnership could benefit from the interactions. Previous studies found that the language in use in informal contexts has a lower lexical density and it is more characterized by incomplete clauses (Tudini, 2004; Tudini, 2010; Liaw & English, 2013) in comparison with formal language use in academic settings. This study could not report such discrepancy because the informal online interactions of students could not be contrasted with a formal and academic context. But it certainly leads us to pose some questions about what effective communication in the TL in the era of social media is. In other words, as far as students learn to tactically use code-switching, to foster their intercultural competence and autonomously are able to create opportunities for TL use is academic language use so important? Opening communication in the TL to out of class settings inevitably implies a more informal degree of interactional dynamics.

The second reflection deals with social networking as a new configuration of learning where formal, informal and non-formal forms are intermingled, which urges researchers to explore new opportunities and approaches. Opportunities for language learning in informal and non-formal contexts have been underexplored and this study filled in this gap. Through answering the research questions, I aimed to make my contribution to the current research in the field in order to gain a better understanding of the learning activities in online communities as non-formal environments. This led me to add further observations and insights to a body of research that supports teachers and learners in tele-collaborative practises and to shed more light on the potentialities of online communities as environments for language learning. The results have shown that the online communi-

ties for L2 learning represent PLEs the use of which can be combined with formal learning settings, provided that students show sense of initiative and autonomy and provided that teachers and platform developers are able to design the learning environment properly. The modalities through which online communities for L2 learning should be designed should be the object of future investigation in the field.

References

Bibliography

All links last accessed April 15, 2015

- Ackermann, E. K. (2004). Constructing knowledge and transforming the world. In M. Tokoro & L. Steels (Eds.), *A learning zone of ones own Sharing representations and flow in collaborative learning environments* (pp. 15–37). IOS Press. Retrieved from http://learning.media.mit.edu/publications/Constructing_Knowledge_Ackermann_2004.pdf
- Ajjan, H., & Hartshorne, R. (2008). Investigating faculty decisions to adopt Web 2.0 technologies: Theory and empirical tests. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 11(2), 71–80. Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1096751608000225>
- Akayoglu, S., & Altun, A. (2009). The Functions of Negotiation of Meaning in Text-Based CMC. In P. L. de Cássia Veiga Marriott, Rita; Torres (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on E-Learning Methodologies for Language Acquisition* (pp. 291–306). IGI Global.
- Ala-Mutka, K. (2010). *JRC Scientific and Technical Reports. Learning in Informal Online Networks and Communities*. Luxembourg. Retrieved from <http://ftp.jrc.es/EURdoc/JRC56310.pdf>
- Alfonzetti, G. (1998). The conversational dimension in codeswitching between Italian and dialect in Sicily. In P. Auer (Ed.), *Code-Switching in Conversation: Language, Interaction and Identity Language, Interaction and Identity* (pp. 180–211). London: Routledge.
- Aljaafreh, A., & Lantolf, P. (1994). Negative Feedback as Regulation and Second Language Learning in the Zone of Proximal Development. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78(4), 465–483.
- Alm, A. (2006). CALL for autonomy, competence and relatedness: Motivating language learning environments in Web 2.0. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 2(3), 29–38. Retrieved from http://jaltcall.org/journal/articles/2_3_Alm.pdf
- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.
- Anderson, L. W., & Burns, R. B. (1989). *Research in Classrooms*. Pergamon Press, Oxford.
- Anderson, T., & Kanuka, H. (2003). *E-research: Methods, strategies, and issues*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

- Andriani, G. (2014). Using Livemocha for independent language learning: a study of students' perception. In Hartono (Ed.), *The 1st Srinwijaya University Learning and Education International Conference (SULE_IC) May 16-18, 2014* (pp. 286–295). Sriwijaya University, Palembang, Indonesia. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/4656345/USING_LIVEMOCHA_FOR_INDEPENDENT_LANGUAGE_LEARNING_A_STUDY_OF_STUDENTS_PERCEPTION
- Antenos-Conforti, E. (2009). Microblogging on Twitter: Social Networking in Intermediate Italian Classes. In L. Lomicka & G. Lord (Eds.), *The Next Generation: Social Networking and Online Collaboration in Foreign Language Learning* (pp. 59–90). San Marcos, TX: CALICO Publications.
- Apgar, M. (1983). Ethnography and cognition. In R. M. Emerson (Ed.), *Contemporary field research: A collection of readings* (pp. 68–77). Waveland, Long Grove, IL.
- Appel, M. C. (1999). Tandem learning by email: some basic principles and a case study. *CLCS Occasional Paper. Dublin. Trinity College. Centre for Language and Communication Studies.*, (54), 1–65. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED430396.pdf>
- Appel, M. C. (2012). Aprenentatge Peer-to-peer en assignatures de llengües estrangeres. In B. Gros & X. Mas (Eds.), *La Comunicació en les espais virtuals. Enfocaments i experiències de formació en línia*. Barcelona: UOC Innova.
- Appel, M. C., & Borges, F. (2012). Task design for L2 oral practice in audioblogs. In *The Eurocall Review*, 20(1). *Proceedings of the Eurocall Conference 2011, held at University of Nottingham, 31st August-3rd September*.
- Appel, M. C., & Pujolà, J. T. (2015). Tandem MOOC: a new approach to LMOOC course and task design. In *Task Design & CALL. XVIIth International CALL Research Conference proceedings*. Tarragona, 6-8 July 2015.
- Appel, M. C., Robbins, J., Moré, J., & Mullen, T. (2012). Task and tool interface design for L2 speaking interaction online. In S. Thouësny & L. Bradley (Eds.), *CALL: Using, Learning, Knowing, EUROCALL Conference, Gothenburg, Sweden, 22-25 August 2012, Proceedings*.
- Archangeli, M. (1999). Study abroad and experiential learning in Salzburg, Austria. *Foreign Language Annals*, 32(1), 115–124. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1999.tb02380.x/epdf>
- Arnold, N., & Paulus, T. (2010). Using a social networking site for experiential learning: Appropriating, lurking, modeling and community building. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13(4), 188–196.
- Auer, P. (1984). *Bilingual conversation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Auer, P. (1988). A conversation analytic approach to code-switching and transfer. In M. Heller (Ed.), *Codeswitching: anthropological and sociolinguistic perspectives* (pp. 187–213). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

- Auer, P. (1995). The pragmatics of code-switching: A sequential approach. In *One speaker, two languages: Cross-disciplinary perspectives on code-switching* (pp. 115–135). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Auer, P. (Ed.). (1998). *Code-Switching in Conversation. Language, Interaction and Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Auer, P. (1999). From Code-Switching via Language Mixing to Fused Lects: Toward a Dynamic Typology of Bilingual Speech. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 3(4), 309–332.
- Barab, S. A., & Duffy, T. M. (2000). From practice fields to communities of practice. In D. H. Jonassen & S. M. Land (Eds.), *Theoretical foundations of learning environments* (pp. 25–55). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Beckett, D., & Hager, Paul, J. (2002). *Life, work and learning: practice in postmodernity*. London: Routledge.
- Belz, J. A. (2001). Institutional and individual dimensions of transatlantic group work in network-based language teaching. *ReCALL*, 13(02), 213–231.
- Belz, J. A. (2003). Linguistic perspectives on the development of intercultural competence in telecollaboration. *Language Learning & Technology*, 7(2), 68–117. Retrieved from <http://llt.msu.edu/vol7num2/belz/>
- Belz, J. A., & Kinginger, C. (2002). The Cross-linguistic Development of Address Form Use in Telecollaborative Language Learning: Two Case Studies. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 59(2), 189–214.
- Benson, P. (2006). Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Lang. Teach.*, (40), 21–40.
- Berners-Lee, T. (2012). The evolution of the Internet: Emerging Challenges and Opportunities. Talk given at the House of the Academy, Cambridge, MA, 6 June 2012. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfCCM0LLkx0>
- Bjørnåvold, J. (2000). *Making learning visible: identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning*. *Vocational Training European Journal*, 22. Cedefop Publications.
- Black, R. W. (2007). Digital design: English language learners and reader reviews in online fanfiction. In M. Knobel & C. Lankshear (Eds.), *A new literacies sampler* (pp. 95–114). New York: Peter Lang.
- Black, R. W. (2008). *Adolescents and online fan fiction*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Black, R. W. (2009). Online Fan Fiction, Global Identities, and Imagination. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 43(4), 397–425. Retrieved from http://coe.utep.edu/ted/images/academic_programs/graduate/pdfs/englisharticles/RTE0434Online.pdf

- Blake, R. J. (2009). The use of technology for second language distance learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, 93, 822–835. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/25612277?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
- Blattner, G., & Fiori, M. (2009). Facebook in the Language Classroom: Promises and Possibilities. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 6(1), 17–28. Retrieved from [http://litu.tu.ac.th/km/05-8 Introduction to abstract Writing 1.pdf](http://litu.tu.ac.th/km/05-8%20Introduction%20to%20abstract%20Writing%201.pdf)
- Blattner, G., & Fiori, M. (2011). Virtual Social Network Communities : An Investigation of Language Learners ' Development of Sociopragmatic Awareness and Multiliteracy Skills. *CALICO Journal*, 29(1), 24–43.
- Blattner, G., & Lomicka, L. (2012a). A sociolinguistic study of practices in different social forums in an intermediate French class. *Instructional Technology and Distance Learning (ITDL)*, 9(9), 3–24. Retrieved from http://www.itdl.org/Journal/Sep_12/Sep_12.pdf
- Blattner, G., & Lomicka, L. (2012b). Facebook-ing and the Social Generation: A New Era of Language Learning. *Alsic*, 15(1). Retrieved from <http://alsic.revues.org/2413>
- Blin, F. (2004). CALL and the development of learner autonomy: Towards an activity-theoretical perspective. *ReCALL*, 16(2), 377–395.
- Blin, F. (2005). *CALL and the development of learner autonomy - an activity theoretical study*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University, UK. Retrieved from <http://www.dcu.ie/~blinf/thesis.htm>
- Blin, F. (2010). Designing Cybertasks for Learner Autonomy: To-wards an Activity Theoretical Pedagogical Model. In M. J. Luzón, M. N. Ruiz-Madrid, & M. L. Villanueva (Eds.), *Digital Genres, New Literacies, and Autonomy in Language Learning*. (pp. 175–196). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Blin, F. (2012). Introducing Cultural Historical Activity Theory for Researching CMC in Foreign Language Education. In M. Dooly & R. O' Dowd (Eds.), *Researching Online Foreign Language Interaction and Exchange* (pp. 78–106). Peter Lang.
- Blin, F., & Appel, M. C. (2011). Computer Supported Collaborative Writing in Practice: An Activity Theoretical Study. *CALICO Journal*, 28(2), 473–497.
- Borau, K., Ullrich, C., Feng, J., & Shen, R. (2009). Microblogging for Language Learning: Using Twitter to Train Communicative and Cultural Competence. In M. Spaniol, Q. Li, R. Klamma, & R. W. Lau (Eds.), *Advances in Web Based Learning-ICWL 2009* (pp. 78–87). Shanghai, China: Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag Berlin. Retrieved from <http://portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1616127>
- Borg, S. (2006). *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice*. London: Continuum.
- boyd, d. M. (2007). Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life. In *Teenage Social Life. Youth, Identity and Digital Media*

- (pp. 119–142). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Retrieved from <http://www.danah.org/papers/WhyYouthHeart.pdf>
- boyd, d. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210–230. Retrieved from <http://www.danah.org/papers/JCMCIntro.pdf>
- Bradner, E., Kellogg, W. A., & Erickson, T. (1999). The Adoption and Use of “BAB- BLE”: A Field Study of Chat in the Workplace. In *Proceedings of the Sixth European Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work 12–16 September 1999, Copenhagen, Denmark* (pp. 139–158). Kluwer Academic Publishers. Retrieved from <http://www.ecscw.org/1999/08.pdf>
- Brammerts, H. (1996). Language learning in tandem using the internet. In *Telecollaboration in foreign language learning: proceedings of the Hawaii symposium, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Second Language teaching and Curriculum Center* (pp. 121–130).
- Brammerts, H., & Tandem Fundazioa Team. (1994). Who is Who in Tandem? Retrieved from http://www.tandemcity.info/general/ca_quien-es-quien.htm
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Brick, B. (2011). Social Networking Sites and Language Learning. *International Journal of Virtual and Personal Learning Environments*, 2(3), 18–31.
- Bruckman, A. (2002). Studying the Amateur Artist: A Perspective on Disguising Data Collected in Human Subjects Research on the Internet. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 4(3), 217–231. Retrieved from http://www.nyu.edu/projects/nissenbaum/ethics_bru_full.html
- Bugeja, M. J. (2006). Facing the Facebook. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Facing-the-Facebook/46904>
- Cáccamo-Alvarez, C. (2000). Para um modelo do “code-switching” e a alternância de variedades como fenómenos distintos: dados do discurso galego-português/espanhol na Galiza. *Estudios de Sociolingüística*, 1(1), 111–128.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1–47.
- Cárdenas-Claros, M. S., & Isharyanti, N. (2009). Code switching and code mixing in Internet chatting: between “yes”, “ya”, and “si” a case study. *Jalt Call Journal*, 5(3), 67–78.
- Carroll, S., Motha, S., & Price, J. (2008). Accessing imagined communities and reinscribing regimes of truth. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 5(3), 165–191.
- Castells, M. (2000). *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. USA: Blackwell.

- Castells, M. (2001). *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*. Oxford University Press Oxford, UK.
- Castells, M. (2011). A Network Theory of Power. *Journal of Communication*, 5, 773–787. Retrieved from <http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1136/553>
- Cedefop. (2008). Terminology of European education and training policy. A selection of 100 key terms. Retrieved from http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/Files/4064_EN.PDF
- Cenoz, J., & Genesee, F. (2001). *Trends in Bilingual Acquisition*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Chotel, L. (2012). *Interactivité et interactions sur un site d'apprentissage et de réseautage en langues : analyse systémique de l'activité de trois apprenants*. Unpublished Master's thesis, Université Stendhal - Grenoble III. Retrieved from <http://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-00743341/document>
- Chotel, L., Mangenot, F. (2011). Autoformation et sites d'apprentissage et de réseautage en langues. In *Proceedings of the EPAL 2011 conference, University Stendhal Grenoble II, France*.
- Chwo, G. S., Lin, Y., Chen, P., & Lai, G. (2012). Engagement with Livemocha as an Informal Learning Resource - Initial Findings from a Technology University Reading Course in Central Taiwan. In *Proceeding of the 20th International Conference on Computers in Education* (pp. 809–813). Taiwan. Retrieved from <http://www.lsl.nie.edu.sg/icce2012/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/C6-s-215.pdf>
- Clark, C., & Gruba, P. (2010). The use of social networking sites for foreign language learning : An autoethnographic study of Livemocha. In *Proceedings Ascilite Sydney 2010* (pp. 164–173).
- Cobo, C., & Moravec, J. (2011). *Aprendizaje invisible. Hacia nueva ecología de la educación*. Barcelona: Laboratori de Mitjans Interactius (LMI), Universitat de Barcelona. Retrieved from <http://www.razonypalabra.org.mx/varia/AprendizajeInvisible.pdf>
- Colardyn, D., & Bjornavold, J. (2004). Validation of Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Learning: policy and practices in EU Member States. *European Journal of Education*, 39(1), 69–89. Retrieved from http://www.competences.info/ibak/root/img/pool/docs/open/bjornavold_colardyn_example_en.pdf
- Colley, H., Hodkinson, P., & Malcolm, J. (2002). Non-formal learning: mapping the conceptual terrain. A Consultation Report. Retrieved from http://infed.org/archives/e-texts/colley_informal_learning.htm
- Coombs, P. H., & Ahmed, M. (1974). *Attacking rural poverty: how nonformal education can help. World Bank research publication*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved from http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2000/02/18/000178830_98101911003374/Rendered/PDF/multi_page.pdf

- Cotroneo, E. (2011). Social networks and language didactics: teaching Italian as a second language with Ning. *eLearning Papers*, 26(October), 1–4. Retrieved from <http://www.openeducationeuropa.eu/en/article/Social-networks-and-language-didactics:-teaching-Italian-as-a-second-language-with-Ning>
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of references for languages: learning, teaching and assessment*. Retrieved from http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf
- Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Cross, J. (2007). *Informal learning: Rediscovering the natural pathways that inspire innovation and performance*. San Francisco: Pfeiffer.
- Crozet, C., & Liddicoat, A. J. (1999). The challenge of intercultural language teaching: Engaging with culture in the classroom. In J. Lo Bianco, A. J. Liddicoat, & C. Crozet (Eds.), *Striving for the Third Place: Intercultural competence through language education* (pp. 113–126). Canberra: Language Australia.
- Crystal, D. (2006). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cummins, J. (1996). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society*. Ontario: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Cummins, J. (2000). Negotiating intercultural identities in the multilingual classroom. *CATESOL Journal*, 12(1), 163–178.
- Daloglu, A., Baturay, M., & Yildirim, S. (2009). Designing a Constructivist Vocabulary Learning Material. In P. L. de Cássia Veiga Marriott, Rita; Torres (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on E-Learning Methodologies for Language Acquisition* (pp. 186–203). IGI Global. Retrieved from <http://www.igi-global.com/viewtitlesample.aspx?id=20029>
- Danet, B., & Herring, S. (2007). *The Multilingual Internet. Language, Culture, and Communication Online*. Oxford University Press.
- Darhower, M. (2002). Instructional features of synchronous computer-mediated communication in the L2 class: A sociocultural case study. *CALICO Journal*, 19(2), 249–277.
- Darhower, M. (2007). A Tale of Two Communities : Group Dynamics and Community Building. *CALICO Journal*, 24(3), 561–589.
- De Kerckhove, D. (1997). *Connected Intelligence: the arrival of the web society*. Toronto: Somerville House.
- Delors, J. (1996). *Learning: The Treasure Within. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001095/109590eo.pdf>

- Dennen, V. (2008). Pedagogical lurking: Student engagement in non-posting discussion behavior. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(4), 1624–1633.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Introduction: Entering the field of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 1–17). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dierking, L. (1991). Learning Theory and Learning Styles: An Overview. *The Journal of Museum Education*, 16(1), 4–6. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/40478871?sid=21106240556863&uid=32051&uid=32050&uid=67&uid=70&uid=2&uid=5909704&uid=3737952&uid=62&uid=2134&uid=3>
- Dillenbourg, P., Poirier, C., & Carles, L. (2003). Communautés virtuelles d'apprentissage: e-jargon ou nouveau paradigme? In A. Taurisson & A. Sentini (Eds.), *Pédagogie.net*. Montréal, Presses.
- Donato, R. (1994). Collective scaffolding in second language learning. In J. P. Lantolf & G. Appel (Eds.), *Vygotskian approaches to second language research*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Donato, R., & MacCormick, D. (1994). A sociocultural perspective on language learning strategies: The role of mediation. *Modern Language Journal*, 78(4), 453–464.
- Dooly, M., & O'Dowd, R. (2012). Introduction. In M. Dooly & R. O'Dowd (Eds.), *Researching Online Foreign Language Interaction and Exchange* (pp. 11–43). Peter Lang.
- Duff, P. A. (2008). *Case study research in applied linguistics*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Eaton, S. E. (2010). Formal, non-formal and informal learning: The case of literacy, essential skills and language learning in Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/eaton/eaton.pdf>
- Eco, U. (1996). The Future of the Book. In G. Nunberg (Ed.), *The Future of the Book* (pp. 295–306). Berkeley, University of California Press. Retrieved from http://www.ideias.online.pt/pdf/IOP_ECO_Thefutureofbook.pdf
- Ellis, J. B., & Abreu Ellis, C. R. (2014). Student Perspectives of Social Networking use in Higher Education. In T. Brinda, N. Reynolds, & R. Romeike (Eds.), *KERCIT 2014: Key Competencies in Informatics and ICT, Potsdam, Germany* (pp. 63–73). University of Potsdam, Germany.
- Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook “friends:” Social capital and college students’ use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), 1143–1168. Retrieved from http://www.researchgate.net/publication/220438224_The_Benefits_of_Facebook_Friends__Social_Capital_and_College_Students'_Use_of_Online_Social_Network_Sites

- Emerson, R. M. (1983). *Contemporary field research: A collection of readings*. Waveland, Long Grove, IL.
- Eneau, J., & Develotte, C. (2012). Working together online to enhance learner autonomy: Analysis of learners' perceptions of their online learning experience. *RECALL*, 24(1), 3–19.
- Engeström, Y. (1987). *Learning by expanding. An activity theoretical approach to developmental research*. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit.
- Engeström, Y. (1999). Activity theory and transformation. In Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen, & R.-L. Punamäki (Eds.), *Perspectives on Activity Theory* (pp. 19–38). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive Learning at Work: toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education and Work*, 14(1), 133–156.
- Engeström, Y. (2008). *From teams to knots: activity-theoretical studies of collaboration and learning at work*. Cambridge University Press.
- Engeström, Y., & Miettinen, R. (1999). Introduction. Activity Theory: A Well-kept Secret. In Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen, & R.-L. Punamäki (Eds.), *Perspectives on Activity Theory* (pp. 1–16). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Eraut, M. (2000). Non-formal learning and tacit knowledge in professional work. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 70(1), 113–136. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1348/000709900158001/epdf>
- Esch, E. (1996). Promoting learner autonomy: criteria for the selection of appropriate methods. In R. Pemberton, E. S. L. Li, W. W. F. Or, & H. D. Pierson (Eds.), *Taking Control: Autonomy in Language Learning* (pp. 35–48). Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press.
- Eshach, H. (2007). Bridging In-school and Out-of-school Learning: Formal, Non-Formal, and Informal Education. *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, 16(2), 171–190. Retrieved from <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10956-006-9027-1>
- Ess, C., & Association of Internet Research Ethics Working Committee. (2002). *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research*. Retrieved from <http://aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>
- Estalella, A., & Ardèvol, E. (2007). Ética de campo: hacia una ética situada para la investigación etnográfica de internet. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 8(3). Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/277/609>
- Feagin, J., Orum, A., & Sjoberg, G. (1991). Introduction. In J. Feagin, A. Orum, & G. Sjoberg (Eds.), *A case for case study* (pp. 1–25). Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

- Fosnot, C. (1992). Constructing constructivism. In T. M. Duffy & D. H. Jonassen (Eds.), *Constructivism and the technology of instruction: A conversation* (pp. 167–176). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Foster, P., & Ohta, A. S. (2005). Negotiation for meaning and peer assistance in second language classrooms. *Applied Linguistics*, 26(3), 402–430.
- Fotos, S. (2001). Codeswitching by Japan's Unrecognised Bilinguals: Japanese University Students' Use of Their Native Language as a Learning Strategy. In M. G. Noguchi & S. Fotos (Eds.), *Studies in Japanese Bilingualism* (pp. 329–352). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Gardner, H. (1993). *Frames Of Mind: The Theory Of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Garrison, D. R., & Kanuka, H. (2004). Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 95–105. Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1096751604000156>
- Gass, S. M. (1997). *Input, Interaction, and the Second Language Learner*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gass, S. M., & Mackey, A. (2000). *Stimulated recall methodology in second language research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gee, J. (2004). *Situated Language and Learning. A critique of traditional schooling*. London: Routledge.
- Gerber, B. L., Marek, E. A., & Cavallo, A. M. L. (2001). Development of an informal learning opportunities assay. *International Journal of Science Education*, 23(6), 569–583. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09500690116959>
- Gilbert, J., & Priest, M. (1997). Models and discourse: A primary school science class visit to a museum. *Science Education*, 81(6), 749–762. Retrieved from [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/\(SICI\)1098-237X\(199711\)81:6<749::AID-SCE10>3.0.CO;2-I/epdf](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/(SICI)1098-237X(199711)81:6<749::AID-SCE10>3.0.CO;2-I/epdf)
- Gillette, B. (1994). The role of learner goals in L2 success. In J. P. Lantolf & G. Appel (Eds.), *Vygotskian approaches to second language research*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Godwin-Jones, R. (2009). EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES PERSONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS. *Language Learning & Technology*, 13(2), 3–9.
- Gonzales, A. (2012). *Interlanguage Pragmatic Development in Native Speaker/Nonnative Speaker Participatory Online Environments*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of New Mexico. Retrieved from <http://repository.unm.edu/handle/1928/21039>
- Gross, R., & Acquisti, A. (2005). Information revelation and privacy in online social networks. In *Proceedings of the 2005 ACM workshop on Privacy in the electronic society* (pp. 71–80). ACM. Retrieved from <http://www.heinz.cmu.edu/~acquisti/papers/privacy-facebook-gross-acquisti.pdf>

- Gruba, P., & Clark, C. (2013). Formative Assessment within Social Network Sites for Language Learning. In M.-N. Lamy & K. Zourou (Eds.), *Social Networking for Language Education* (pp. 177–193). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105–117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gumperz, J. (1982). *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gumperz, J. J., & Blom, J. P. (1972). Social Meaning in Linguistic Structure: Code-Switching in Norway. In J. J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in Sociolinguistics: the Ethnography of Communication* (pp. 407–434). New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Gutiérrez, K. D. (2008). Developing a sociocritical literacy in the third space. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 43, 148–164.
- Halvorsen, A. (2009). Social Networking Sites and Critical Language Learning. In M. Thomas (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Web 2.0 and Second Language Learning* (Vol. 2, pp. 237–258). Hershey, New York: Information Science Reference. Retrieved from <http://www.irma-international.org/viewtitle/39774/>
- Harrison, R. (2013). Profiles in Social Networking Sites for Language Learning - Live-mocha Revisited. In M.-N. Lamy & K. Zourou (Eds.), *Social Networking for Language Education* (pp. 100–116). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harrison, R., & Thomas, M. (2009). Identity in Online Communities: Social Networking Sites and Language Learning. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society*, 7(2), 109–124.
- Hasu, M., & Engeström, Y. (2000). Measurement in action: An activitytheoretical perspective on producer-user interaction. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 53, 61–89.
- Haythornthwaite, C. (2002). Strong, Weak, and Latent Ties and the Impact of New Media. *The Information Society*, 18, 385–401. Retrieved from [http://emmtii.wikispaces.asu.edu/file/view/Shakespeare Hero Demo.pdf](http://emmtii.wikispaces.asu.edu/file/view/Shakespeare+Hero+Demo.pdf)
- Haythornthwaite, C. (2005). Social networks and Internet connectivity effects. *Information, Communication & Society*, 8(2), 125–147. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13691180500146185>
- Hellermann, J. (2008). *Social Actions for Classroom Language Learning*. Clevedon, UK.
- Hewitt, A., & Forte, A. (2006). Crossing Boundaries : Identity Management and Student / Faculty Relationships on the Facebook. In *Presented at the Computer Supported Cooperative Work Conference, Banff, Alberta, Canada*. (Vol. 38).
- Hitosugi, C. (2011). Trust on the web: The power of subjective norm across cultures. In *Proceedings of the 15th Cross-Cultural Research Conference. Brigham Young University- Hawaii*,

- HI. CD. Retrieved from http://claireh.weebly.com/uploads/5/2/9/9/5299882/hitosugi_sninonlinetrust_cr_osscultureconf_dec2011.pdf
- Hofstein, A., & Rosenfeld, S. (1996). Bridging the gap between formal and informal science learning. *Studies in Science Education*, 28(1), 87–112. Retrieved from [http://www.bobpearlman.org/BestPractices/Israel/Bridging the Gap.pdf](http://www.bobpearlman.org/BestPractices/Israel/Bridging%20the%20Gap.pdf)
- Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Holtzer, G. (2002). Learning Culture by Communicating: Native–Non- Native Speaker Telephone Interactions. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 15(3), 235–242. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/07908310208666647>
- Huffman, S. (2011). Livemocha. *TESL-EJ*, 15(3), 1–9.
- James, N., & Busher, H. (2009). *Online Interviewing*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Jee, M. J., & Park, M. J. (2009). Livemocha as an online language-learning community. *CALICO Journal*, 26(2), 448–456.
- Jefferson, G. (1987). On exposed and embedded correction in conversation. In G. Button & J. R. E. Lee (Eds.), *Talk and social organization* (pp. 86–100). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters. Retrieved from http://www.liso.ucsb.edu/liso_archives/Jefferson/Embedded_Correction.pdf
- Jefferson, G. (2004). Glossary of transcript symbols with an Introduction. In J. H. Lerner (Ed.), *Conversation Analysis: Studies from the first generation* (pp. 13–23). Philadelphia: John Benjamins. Retrieved from http://www.liso.ucsb.edu/liso_archives/Jefferson/Transcript.pdf
- Jepson, K. (2005). Conversations and negotiated interaction in text and voice chatrooms. *Language Learning & Technology*, 9(3), 79–98. Retrieved from <http://www.llt.msu.edu/vol9num3/jepson/default.html>
- Johnson, B., & Christensen, L. (2008). *Educational Research. Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Johnson, C. M. (2001). A survey of current research on online communities of practice. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 4(1), 45–60. Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.106.5848&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Kabilan, M. K., Ahmad, N., & Abidin, M. J. Z. (2010). Facebook: An Online Environment for Learning of English in Institutions of Higher Education? *Internet and Higher Education*, 13(4), 179–187. Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1096751610000588>
- Kasper, G. (2004). Participant Orientations in German Conversation-for-Learning. *Modern Language Journal*, 88(4), 551–567. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ687069&si>

te=ehost-
li-
ve&scope=cite\nhttps://login.ezp1.lib.umn.edu/login?url=http://content.ebscohost.com/ContentServer.asp?T=P&P=AN&K=null&S=R&D=eft&EbscoContent=dGJyMNxb4kSeprU4y9fwOLCmr0qep

- Kelley, J. A. (2010a). *Empowering imagined identities: social network sites in a chinese english as a foreign language classroom*. PhD Thesis, University of Memphis.
- Kelley, J. A. (2010b). Social network sites and the ideal L2 self: Using Myspace in a Chinese EFL class. *Jalt Call Journal*, 6(1), 17–33.
- Kikuchi, K., & Otsuka, T. (2008). Investigating the use of social networking services in Japanese EFL classrooms. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 4(1), 40–52.
- Kirschner, P. A. (2002). Can we support CCSL? Educational, social and technological affordances. In *Three worlds of CSCL: Can we support CSCL?* (pp. 7–47). The Open Universiteit Nederland. Retrieved from http://www.ou.nl/Docs/Onderzoek/Oraties/2002/oratieboek_PKI_DEF_Klein_ZO.pdf
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning. Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Komatsu, S. (2011). “Sosharu Media To Gaikokugo Gakushu. Education - Furansugo No Atarashii Manabi No Tameni” (Social Media and Learning Foreign Languages: A New Approach for Learning French). *Rencontres Pédagogiques Du Kansai*, 76–80. Retrieved from http://www.rpkansai.com/bulletins/pdf/025/076_080_Komatsu.pdf
- Kozinets, R. V. (2010). *Netnography. Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Kramsch, C. (2000). Second Language Acquisition, Applied Linguistics, and the Teaching of Foreign Languages. *The Modern Language Journal*, 84(3), 311–326. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/330563?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
- Kramsch, C., & Thorne, S. L. (2002). Foreign Language Learning as Global Communicative Practice. In D. Block & D. Cameron (Eds.), *Globalization and Language Teaching* (pp. 83–100). London: Routledge.
- Krashen, S. D. (1976). Formal and Informal Linguistic Environments in Language Acquisition and Language Learning. *Tesol Quarterly*, 10(2), 157–168. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3585637>
- Krashen, S. D. (1981). *Second language acquisition an second language learning. Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Oxford Pergamon.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. London: Longman.
- Kurata, N. (2004). Social Networks of Language Learners and Collaborative Interaction with Native Speakers: A case study of two Australian learners of Japanese. *ASAA E-Journal of Asian Linguistics & Language Teaching*, (7), 1–22.
- Kurata, N. (2007). Language choice and second language learning opportunities in learners' social networks: A case study of an Australian learner of Japanese. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 30(1), 5.1–5.18. Retrieved from <http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/aryl/article/viewFile/1938/2321>
- Kurata, N. (2011). *Foreign Language Learning and Use: Interaction in Informal Social Networks*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Kurata, N. (2014). Construction of L1/L2 use in informal social networks: A study of learners of Japanese in Australia. *Linguistics and Education*, (27), 14–29.
- Kuutti, K. (1996). Activity Theory as a potential framework for Human-Computer Interaction research. In B. Nardi (Ed.), *Context and consciousness: Activity Theory and Human-Computer Interaction* (pp. 17–44). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks.
- La Belle, T. J. (1982). Formal, Nonformal and Informal Education: A Holistic Perspective on Lifelong Learning. *International Review of Education*, 28(2), 159–175. Retrieved from <http://www.springerlink.com/index/U77M5272327KN121.pdf>
- Lafford, B. A. (2009). Toward an ecological CALL: Update to Garrett (1991). *The Modern Language Journal*, 93, 673–696.
- Lai, C., & Zhao, Y. (2006). Noticing and text-based chat. *Language Learning & Technology*, 10(3), 102–120.
- Lam, W. S. E. (2000). L2 Literacy and the Design of the Self: A Case Study of a Teenager Writing on the Internet. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(3), 457–483. Retrieved from <http://www.quia.com/files/quia/users/drdecker/RDG530/L2-Literacy-and-the-Desing-of-the-Self-A-Case-Study-of-a-Teenager-Writing-in-the-Internet.pdf>
- Lam, W. S. E. (2004). Second language socialization in a bilingual chat room: global and local considerations. *Language Learning & Technology*, 8(3), 44–65. Retrieved from <http://llt.msu.edu/vol8num3/pdf/lam.pdf>
- Lam, W. S. E. (2009). Multiliteracies on Instant Messaging in Negotiating Local, Trans-local, and Transnational Affiliations: A Case of an Adolescent Immigrant. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(4), 377–397. Retrieved from <https://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/docs/publications/9119555464ace678f8c1f8.pdf>
- Lampe, C. A. C., Ellison, N., & Steinfield, C. (2007). A familiar face (book): profile elements as signals in an online social network. In *Proceedings Online Representation of Self*,

- April 28-May 3, 2007, San Jose, CA, USA* (pp. 435–444). ACM. Retrieved from https://www.msu.edu/~steinfie/CHI_manuscript.pdf
- Lamy, M.-N., & Mangenot, F. (2013). Social Media-Based Language Learning: Insights from Research and Practice. In M.-N. Lamy & K. Zourou (Eds.), *Social Networking for Language Education* (pp. 197–213). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lamy, M.-N., & Zourou, K. (2013). Introduction. In M.-N. Lamy & K. Zourou (Eds.), *Social Networking for Language Education* (pp. 1–7). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lantolf, J. P. (2000). Introducing socio-cultural theory. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning* (pp. 1–26). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lantolf, J. P., & Pavlenko, A. (2001). (S)econd (L)anguage (A)ctivity theory: understanding second language learners as people. In M. Breen (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning: new directions in research* (pp. 141–158). Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006a). Sociocultural theory and second language learning. In B. Van Patten & J. Williams (Eds.), *Theories in second language acquisition* (pp. 201–224). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006b). *Sociocultural Theory and the Genesis of Second Language Development. Language and Education* (Vol. 22). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lavin, R. S., & Claro, J. (2005). Platforms. Wikis as constructivist learning environments. In *JALTCALL 2005 Proceedings "Glocalization through CALL: Bringing people together"* (pp. 7–13).
- Leis, A. (2014). Encouraging autonomy through the use of a social networking system. *Jalt Call Journal*, 10(1), 69–80.
- Leont'ev, A. N. (1978). *Activity, consciousness, and personality*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Lewis, K., Kaufman, J., & Christakis, N. (2008). The Taste for Privacy: An Analysis of College Student Privacy Settings in an Online Social Network. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14(1), 79–100. Retrieved from <http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~kmlewis/privacy.pdf>
- Liaw, M.-L. (2011). Review of Livemocha. *Language Learning & Technology*, 15(1), 36–40. Retrieved from <http://llt.msu.edu/issues/february2011/review4.pdf>
- Liaw, M.-L., & English, K. (2013). Online and Offsite: Student-Drive Development of the Taiwan-France Telecollaborative Project Beyond These Walls. In M.-N. Lamy & K. Zourou (Eds.), *Social Networking for Language Education* (pp. 158–176). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Liddicoat, A. J. (2002). Static and dynamic views of culture and intercultural language acquisition. *Babel*, 36(3(4)), 11–37.
- Liebscher, G., & Dailey-O’Cain, J. (2005). Learner Code-Switching in the Content-Based Foreign Language Classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89(2), 234–247.
- Lin, C.-H. (2012). *Language Learning through Social Networks: Perceptions and Reality*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Irvine. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1266388545>
- Lisbôa, E. S., & Coutinho, C. P. (2013). Livemocha: rede social de aprendizagem colaborativas en línguas estrangeiras. In *Universidade do Minho Centro de Investigação em Educação > CIED* (pp. 1–14). Centro de Competencias Nonio Sec. XXI.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy 1: definitions, issues and problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Little, D. (2003). Tandem language learning and learning autonomy. In T. Lewis & L. Walker (Eds.), *Autonomous language learning in tandem* (pp. 37–44). Sheffield, UK: Academy Electronic Publications.
- Little, D. (2004). Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy and the European Language Portfolio. In *UNTELE, Université de Compiègne, 17–20 March 2004* (pp. 1–3). Retrieved from <http://www.utc.fr/~untele/2004ppt/handouts/little.pdf>
- Little, D. (2006). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: A research agenda. *Language Teaching*, 39(3). Retrieved from <http://www.uni-leipzig.de/actflcefr/material/Teaching Learning CEFR Little.pdf>
- Liu, M., Abe, K., Cao, M. W., Liu, S., Ok, D. U., Park, J., ... Sardegna, V. G. (2015). An analysis of social network websites for language learning: Implications for teaching and learning English as a Second Language. *CALICO Journal*, 32(1), 113–152. Retrieved from <http://www.equinoxpub.com/journals/index.php/CALICO/article/view/25963>
- Liu, M., Evans, M., Horwitz, E. K., Lee, S., McCrory, M., Park, J. B., & Parrish, C. (2013). A Study of the Use of Language Learning Websites with Social Network Features By University ESL Students. In M. Lamy & K. Zourou (Eds.), *Social Networking for Language Education* (pp. 137–157). NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Livingstone, D. W. (2001). *Adults’ Informal Learning: Definitions, Findings, Gaps and Future Research*. *NALL Working Papers* (Vol. 2004). Toronto: Center for Study of Education and Work/ Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education/ Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/ University of Toronto. Retrieved from <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/retrieve/4484/21adultsinformallearning.pdf>
- Lloyd, E. (2012). Language Learners’ “Willingness to Communicate” through Livemocha.com. *Alsic*, 15(1). Retrieved from <http://alsic.revues.org/2437>
- Lockyer, L., & Patterson, J. (2008). Integrating Social Networking Technologies in Education: A Case Study of a Formal Learning Environment. In *Eighth IEEE International Conference on Advanced Learning Technologies, 1-5 July, 2008* (pp. 529–533). Santan-

- der, Spain: IEEE. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/3547800/Integrating_Social_Networking_Technologies_in_Education_A_Case_Study_of_a_Formal_Learning_Environment
- Loiseau, M., Potolia, A., and Zourou, K. (2011). Communautés web 2.0 d'apprenants de langue avec parcours d'apprentissage : rôles, pédagogie et rapports au contenu. In *Proceedings of ELAH'2011 : A la recherche des convergences entre les acteurs des ELAH*. (pp. 112–123). Université de Mons- Hainaut. Retrieved from <http://openeducationeuropa.eu/en/book/socializing-and-learning-languages-web-20-communities>
- Long, H. (1980). *Input, interaction, and second language acquisition*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, UCLA, Department of Applied Linguistics and TESL.
- Long, M. H., & Sato, C. J. (1983). Classroom foreigner talk discourse: Forms and functions of teachers' questions. In H. W. Seliger & M. H. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second languages* (pp. 268–285). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Long, M., & Robinson, P. (1998). Focus on form: Theory, research, and practice. In C. Doughty & J. Williams (Eds.), *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (pp. 15–63). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lopes, C. C., & Coutinho, C. P. (2013). Livemocha: perfil e percepções do utilizador português. In *Actas da VII Conferencia Internacional de TIC na Educação, Challenges 2013* (pp. 1024–1033). Centro de Competência TIC do IE-UM, Braga: Universidade do Minho.
- Lu, J., & Law, N. (2011). Online peer assessment: Effects of cognitive and affective feedback. *Instructional Science*, 40(2), 257–275.
- Lynch, J. (2002). What can we learn from McLuhan? Electronic communication technologies and the future of schooling. In P. L. Jeffrey (Ed.), *AARE 2002 : Problematic futures: educational research in an era of uncertainty ; AARE 2002 conference papers, Australian Association for Research in Education, Coldstream, Vic.* (pp. 1–16). Brisbane, Queensland: Australian Association for Research in Education. Retrieved from <http://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/2002/lyn02031.pdf>
- MacIntyre, P. D., Dörnyei, Z., Clément, R., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *Modern Language Journal*, 82(4), 545–562.
- Markee, N. (2000). *Conversation Analysis*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Marsick, V. J., & Volpe, M. (1999). The nature and need for informal learning. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 1(3), 1–9. Retrieved from <http://adh.sagepub.com/content/1/3/1.full.pdf+html>
- Marsick, V. J., & Watkins, K. E. (2001). Informal and incidental learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, (89), 25–34. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ace.5/pdf>

- Martin, A. (2005). DigEuLit European framework for digital literacy: a progress report. *Journal of eLiteracy*, 2, 130–266. Retrieved from http://www.jelit.org/65/01/JeLit_Paper_31.pdf?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter
- Mason, R. (2006). Learning technologies for adult continuing education. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 28(2), 121–133. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01580370600751039>
- Masuda, Y. (2009). Negotiation of language selection in Japanese-English exchange partnerships. In J. Nekvapil & T. Sherman (Eds.), *Language Management in Contact Situations: Perspectives from Three Continents* (pp. 185–205). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Mayes, T., & De Freitas, S. (2007). Learning and e-learning: the role of theory. In H. Beetham & R. Sharpe (Eds.), *Rethinking Pedagogy for a digital age* (pp. 13–25). Routledge.
- Mazer, J. P., Murphy, R. E., & Simonds, C. J. (2007). I'll see you on "Facebook": The effects of computer-mediated teacher self-disclosure on student motivation, affective learning, and classroom climate. *Communication Education*, 56(1), 1–17. Retrieved from <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a769651179>
- Mazman, S. G., & Usluel, Y. K. (2009). The usage of social networks in educational context. *Proceedings of World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology*, 3, 404–407. Retrieved from <http://waset.org/publications/2752/the-usage-of-social-networks-in-educational-context>
- McBride, K. (2009). Social-networking sites in foreign language classes: Opportunities for recreation. In L. Lomicka & G. Lord (Eds.), *The next generation: Social networking and online collaboration in foreign language learning* (pp. 35–58).
- McCarty, S. (2009). Social networking behind student lines in Japan. In M. Thomas (Ed.), *Handbook of research on Web 2.0 and second language learning* (pp. 181–201). Hershey, New York: Information Science Reference.
- McGroarty, M. (1998). Constructive and Constructivist Challenges for Applied Linguistics. *Language Learning*, 48(4), 591–622.
- McLoughlin, C., & Lee, M. J. W. (2007). Social software and participatory learning: Pedagogical choices with technology affordances in the Web 2.0 era. In *ICT: Providing choices for learners and learning. Proceedings ascilite Singapore 2007* (pp. 664–675). Retrieved from <http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/singapore07/procs/mcloughlin.pdf>
- McLoughlin, C., & Lee, M. J. W. (2008). Future learning landscapes: Transforming pedagogy through social software. *Innovate: Journal of Online Education*, 4(5). Retrieved from www.editlib.org/d/104240/
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited.

- McLuhan, M., & Fiore, Q. (1967). *The medium is the message* (Random Hou.). New York.
- McLuhan, M., & Leonard, G. B. (1967). The future of education: The class of 1989. *LOOK Magazine*, 23–25. Retrieved from <http://learningspaces.org/files/mcluhanfs.html>
- McLuhan, M., & Powers, B. (1989). *The global village: Transformations in world life and media in the 21st Century*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Meier, G., & Daniels, H. (2011). “Just not being able to make friends”: social interaction during the year abroad in modern foreign language degrees. *Research Papers in Education*, 28(2), 212–238.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mills, N. (2011). Situated Learning through Social Networking Communities: The Development of Joint Enterprise, Mutual Engagement, and a Shared Repertoire. *CALICO Journal*, 28(2), 345–368.
- Milroy, L. (1987). *Language and Social Networks*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Mitchell, K. (2012). A Social Tool: Why and How ESOL Students Use Facebook. *Calico Journal*, 29(3), 471–493. Retrieved from <http://www.equinoxpub.com/journals/index.php/CALICO/article/view/23721>
- Morin, E. (1990). *Introduction à la pensée complexe*. Paris: Editions de Seuil.
- Mork, C.-M. (Trine). (2009). Using Twitter in EFL Education. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 5(3), 41–56.
- Muraoka, H. (2000). Management of intercultural input: A case study of two Korean residents in Japan. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 10(2), 297–311.
- Musser, J., O’ Reilly, T., & O’ Reilly Radar Team. (2006). *Web 2.0 principles and best practices*. Sebastopol, CA: O’ Reilly. Retrieved from <http://repo.mynoooblife.org/.priv8/Ebook/Web 2.0 Principles and Best Practices.pdf>
- Myers, L. (2000). Task Interpretation and Task Effectiveness: A Vygotskian Analysis of a French L2 Classroom Task. In *Proceedings for the Texas Foreign Language [Education] Conference (Austin, Texas, March 31-April 1, 2000)*.
- Myers-Scotton, C. (1993). *Social motivations for codeswitching: Evidence from Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mynard, J. (2004). Research In ELT: proceedings of the international conference. In *Investigating evidence of learner autonomy in a virtual EFL classroom: a grounded theory approach*. (pp. 117–127). School of Liberal Arts and the Continuing Education Center, King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand.

- Mynard, J. (2011). Learning environments that facilitate reflection on language learning. *Jalt Call Journal*, 7(3), 293–306.
- National Agency for Education. (2000). *Lifelong Learning and Lifewide Learning*. Skolverket, Liber Distribution Publikationstjänst, Stockholm. Liber Distribution Publikationstjänst, Stockholm. Retrieved from http://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/publikationer/visa-enskild-publikation?_url_=http://www5.skolverket.se/wtpub/ws/skolbok/wpubext/trycksak/Blob/pdf638.pdf?k=638
- Neustupný, J. V. (1994). Problems of English contact discourse and language planning. In *English and Language Planning* (pp. 50–69). Singapore: Academic Press.
- Neustupný, J. V. (2003). Japanese students in Prague. Problems of communication and interaction. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, (162), 125–143. Retrieved from <http://cat.inist.fr/?aModele=afficheN&cpsid=15079166>
- Nilep, C. (2006). Code Switching ” in Sociocultural Linguistics. *Colorado Research in Linguistics*, 19(June), 1–22.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning. Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. London: Longman.
- Norton, B. (2001). Non-participation, imagined communities and the language classroom. In M. Breem (Ed.), *Learner Contributions to Language Learning* (pp. 159–171). Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.
- Norton, B., & Gao, Y. (2008). Identity, investment, and Chinese learners of English. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 18(1), 109–120. Retrieved from [http://faculty.educ.ubc.ca/norton/Norton & Gao 2008.pdf](http://faculty.educ.ubc.ca/norton/Norton%20&%20Gao%202008.pdf)
- Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2001). Changing Perspectives on Good Language Learners. *Tesol Quarterly*, 35(2), 307–322.
- Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2004). *Critical pedagogies and language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norton Peirce, B. (1995). Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning. *Tesol Quarterly*, 29(1), 9–31.
- Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O’ Dowd, R. (2003). Understanding the “other side”: Intercultural learning in a Spanish-English email exchange. *Language Learning & Technology*, 7(2), 118–144. Retrieved from <http://llt.msu.edu/vol7num2/odowd/>
- Ohta, A. (1995). Applying Sociocultural Theory to an Analysis of Learner Discourse: Learner - Learner Collaborative Interaction in the Zone of Proximal Development. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 6(2), 93–121.

- Ohta, A. (2000). Rethinking interaction in SLA: Developmentally appropriate assistance in the zone of proximal development and the acquisition of L2 grammar. In J. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 51–78). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Orsini-Jones, M., Brick, B., & Pibworth, L. (2011). Blurring of local and global pedagogies on Social Networking Sites. In *BAAL (British Association for Applied Linguistics). Language Learning and Teaching Special Interest Group Conference. Birmingham, UK. Birmingham, UK.*
- Orsini-Jones, M., Brick, B., & Pibworth, L. (2013). Practising Language Interaction via Social Networking Sites: the “expert student’s” perspective on personalized language learning. In B. Zou, M. Xing, W. Yuping, M. Sun, & C. Xiang (Eds.), *Computer-Assisted Foreign Language Teaching and Learning: Technological Advances*. (pp. 40–53). Philadelphia, USA: IGI Global.
- Oxford, R., Cho, Y., Leung, S., & Kim, H. J. (2004). Effect of the presence and difficulty of task on strategy use: An exploratory study. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 42, 1–47.
- Pasfield-Neofitou, S. E. (2007a). Intercultural Internet Chat and Language Learning: A Socio-cultural Theory Perspective. *Learning and Socio-Cultural Theory: Exploring Modern Vygotskian Perspectives International Workshop*, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=llrg>
- Pasfield-Neofitou, S. E. (2007b). Textual Features of Intercultural Internet Chat between Learners of Japanese and English. *CALL-EJ Online*, 9(1). Retrieved from <http://callej.org/journal/9-1/pasfield-neofitou.html>
- Pasfield-Neofitou, S. E. (2009). Learners’ Participation in Informal Japanese-English Internet Chat. *New Voices*, 3, 43–62. Retrieved from <http://newvoices.jpfsydney.org/3/chapter3.pdf>
- Pavlenko, A., & Lantolf, J. P. (2000). Second language learning as participation and the (re)construction of selves. In J. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 155–178). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pegrum, M. (2009). Communicative networking and linguistic mashups on Web 2.0. In M. Thomas (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Web 2.0 and Second Language Learning* (Vol. 2, pp. 20–41). Hershey, New York: Information Science Reference. Retrieved from <http://www.irma-international.org/viewtitle/37679/>
- Pereira, G., & Pinto, R. (2009). Livemocha e a aprendizagem “todos-todos.” In *Universidade Estadual de Campinas CS405 - Educação e Tecnologia*. Retrieved from http://www.iar.unicamp.br/disciplinas/CS405_2010/alunos/raphael/projeto2.pdf
- Perry, L. F. (2005). *Research in applied linguistics: Becoming a discerning consumer*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Peterson, M. (2012). EFL learner collaborative interaction in Second Life. *ReCALL*, 24(1), 20–39.

- Pettenati, M. C., & Cigognini, M. E. (2007). Social networking theories and tools to support connectivist learning activities. *International Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies*, 2(3), 42–60. Retrieved from <http://www.irma-international.org/viewtitle/22293/>
- Pettenati, M. C., & Ranieri, M. (2006). Informal learning theories and tools to support knowledge management in distributed CoPs. In P. Tomadaki, E; Scott (Ed.), *Innovative Approaches for Learning and Knowledge Sharing, EC-TEL. Workshop Proceeding* (pp. 345–355). Springer. Retrieved from <http://ftp.informatik.rwth-aachen.de/Publications/CEUR-WS/Vol-213/paper47.pdf>
- Piaget, J. (1954). *The construction of reality in the child*. New York: Basic Books.
- Piaget, J. (1970). *Science of education and the psychology of the child*. New York: Orion Press.
- Piaget, J., & Inhelder, B. (1971). *The child's conception of space*. (T. F. J. Langdon & J. L. Lunzer, Ed.). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Pica, T. (1987). Second language acquisition, social interaction, and the classroom. *Applied Linguistics*, 8(1), 1–25.
- Pica, T., & Long, M. H. (1986). The linguistic and conversational performance of experienced and inexperienced teachers. In R. R. Day (Ed.), *Talking to Learn: Conversation in Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 85–98). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Potolia, A., Loiseau, M., Zourou, K. 2011. (2011). Quelle(s) pédagogie(s) voi(en)t le jour dans les (grandes) communautés Web 2.0 d'apprenants de langue? In C. Dejean, F. Mangenot, & T. Soubrié (Eds.), *Proceedings of the EPAL 2011 conference, University Stendhal Grenoble II, France*. Retrieved from <http://openeducationeuropa.eu/en/book/socializing-and-learning-languages-web-20-communities>
- Prichard, C. (2013). Training L2 learners to use Facebook appropriately and effectively. *CALICO Journal*, 30(2), 204–226. Retrieved from <http://www.equinoxpub.com/journals/index.php/CALICO/article/viewFile/22955/22795>
- Reinhardt, J., & Chen, H.-I. (2013). An Ecological Analysis of Social Networking Site-Mediated Identity Development. In M.-N. Lamy & K. Zourou (Eds.), *Social Networking for Language Education* (pp. 11–30). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reinhardt, J., & Zander, V. (2011). Social Networking in an Intensive English Program Classroom: A Language Socialization Perspective. *CALICO Journal*, 28(2), 326–344.
- Resnick, L. B. (1987). The 1987 Presidential Address: Learning in School and out. *Educational Researcher*, 16(9), 13–20. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1175725>
- Roblyer, M. D., McDaniel, M., Webb, M., Herman, J., & Witty, J. V. (2010). Findings on Facebook in higher education: A comparison of college faculty and student uses and perceptions of social networking sites. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13(3),

134–140. Retrieved from
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1096751610000278>

Rogoff, B., Paradise, R., Arauz, R. M., Correa-Chavez, M., & Angelillo, C. (2003). First-hand learning through intent participation. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *54*(1), 175–203. Retrieved from
http://calteach.ucsc.edu/People_/Instructors/documents/Rogoff-LearninginAdolescence.pdf

Romaine, S. (1989). *Bilingualism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 68–78.

Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Sani, I., & Bature, M. S. (2014). The Impact of Social Networks on ESL Undergraduate Students' Writing in Nigeria. *Arts Social Sci J*, *5*(2), 485–501.

Sauro, S. (2001). *The success of task type in facilitating oral language production in online computer mediated collaborative projects*. Unpublished master's thesis, Iowa State University, Ames. Retrieved from
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=15394&context=rtd>

Sauro, S. (2009). Computer-Mediated Corrective Feedback and the Development of L2 Grammar. *Language Learning & Technology*, *13*(1), 96–120.

Sauro, S., & Smith, B. (2010). Investigating L2 performance in text chat. *Applied Linguistics*, *31*(4), 554–577.

Savignon, S. J. (1997). *Communicative competence: Theory and classroom practice (2nd ed.)*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Schegloff, E. A., Jefferson, G., & Sacks, H. (1977). The preference for self-correction in the organization of repair in conversation. *Language*, *53*(2), 361–382. Retrieved from
http://www.jstor.org/stable/413107?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Schwandt, T. A. (1994). Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 118–137). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1973). Cognitive Consequences of Formal and Informal Education: New accommodations are needed between school-based learning and learning experiences of everyday life. *Science*, *182*(4112), 553–559.

Sebba, M., & Wootton, T. (1998). We, They and Identity: Sequential vs. Identity-related Explanation in Code-switching. In P. Auer (Ed.), *Code-Switching in Conversation: Language, Interaction and Identity* (pp. 262–289). London: Routledge.

- Selwyn, N. (2007a). Screw Blackboard... do it on Facebook!?: an investigation of students' educational use of Facebook. In *Poke 1.0 - Facebook social research symposium, University of London, 15th November 2007*. Poke. Retrieved from <http://startrekdigitalliteracy.pbworks.com/f/2g19b89ezl6ursp6e749.pdf>
- Selwyn, N. (2007b). Web 2.0 applications as alternative environments for informal learning—a critical review. In *Paper for OCEDKERIS expert meeting. Alternative learning environments in practice: using ICT to change impact and outcomes*. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/39458556.pdf>
- Selwyn, N. (2009). Faceworking: Exploring Students' Education-Related Use of "Facebook." *Learning, Media and Technology*, 34(2), 157–174. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/17439880902923622>
- Shettzer, H., Shettzer, H., Warschauer, M., Warschauer, M., Kern, R., & Kern, R. (2000). An electronic literacy approach to network-based language teaching. In M. Warschauer & R. Kern (Eds.), *Network-based language teaching: Concepts and practice* (pp. 171–185). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Siemens, G. (2006). Learning or Management Systems? A Review of Learning Management System Reviews. Retrieved from <http://www.connectivism.ca/?p=243>
- Smith, B. (2005). The relationship between negotiated interaction, learner uptake, and lexical acquisition in task-based computer-mediated communication. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(1), 33–58.
- Stevenson, M., & Liu, M. (2010). Learning a Language with Web 2.0: Exploring the Use of Social Networking Features of Foreign Language Learning Websites. *CALICO Journal*, 27(2), 233–259.
- Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (1998). Interaction and second language learning: Two adolescent French immersion students working together. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(3), 320–337.
- Tanaka, N. (2005). Collaborative Interaction as the Process of Task Completion in Task-Based CALL classrooms. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 1(2), 21–40.
- Tapscott, D., & Williams, A. (2007). *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Tarone, E. (1981). Some Thoughts on the Notion of Communication Strategy. *TESOL Quarterly* 1, 15(3), 285–295.
- Thomsen, S. R., Straubhaar, J. D., & Bolyard, D. M. (1998). Ethnomethodology and the study of online communities: exploring the cyber streets. *Information Research*, 4(1), 1–4.
- Thorne, S. L. (2003). Artifacts and Cultures-of-Use in Intercultural Communication. *Language, Learning & Technology*, 7(2), 39–67. Retrieved from <http://llt.msu.edu/vol7num2/thorne/default.html>

- Thorne, S. L. (2004). Cultural Historical Activity Theory and the Object of Innovation. In K. Van Esch & O. St. John (Eds.), *New Insights into Foreign Language Learning and Teaching* (pp. 51–70). Peter Lang.
- Thorne, S. L., Black, R. W., & Sykes, J. M. (2009). Second Language Use, Socialization, and Learning in Internet Interest Communities and Online Gaming. *The Modern Language Journal*, 93(1), 803–821. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2009.00974.x/epdf>
- Thorne, S. L., & Reinhardt, J. (2008). “Bridging Activities,” New Media Literacies, and Advanced Foreign Language Proficiency. *CALICO Journal*, 25(3), 558–572.
- Toffler, A. (1980). *The Third Wave*. USA: Bantam Books.
- Toyoda, E., & Harrison, R. (2002). Categorization of Text Chat Communication between Learners and Native Speakers of Japanese. *Language, Learning & Technology*, 6(1).
- Tudini, V. (2004). Virtual immersion: native speaker chats as a bridge to conversational Italian. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics. Special Issue on Using and Learning Italian in Australia, Edited by A. Rubino. Series S, 18*, 63–80.
- Tudini, V. (2010). *Online Second Language Acquisition. Conversation Analysis of Online Chat*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Ushioda, E. (2006). Language motivation in a reconfigured Europe: access, identity, autonomy. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 27, 149–161.
- Üstünel, E., & Seedhouse, P. (2005). Why that, in that language, right now? Code-switching and pedagogical focus. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 15(3), 302–325.
- Van Lier, L. (1988). *The Classroom and the Language Learner. Ethnography and Second-Language Classroom Research*. Harlow: Longman.
- Van Lier, L. (1996). *Interaction in the Language Curriculum. Awareness, Autonomy and Authenticity*. USA: Longman.
- Van Lier, L. (2000). From input to affordance : Social-interactive learning from an ecological perspective. In J. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 245–259). Oxford University Press.
- Varonis, E. M., & Gass, S. M. (1985). Non-native/non-native conversations: A model for negotiation of meaning. *Applied Linguistics*, 6(1), 71–90. Retrieved from <http://appliedjournals.org/content/6/1/71.full.pdf+html>
- Villanueva, M. L., Ruiz-Madrid, M. N., & Luzón, M. J. (2010). Learner autonomy in digital environments: conceptual framework. In *Digital Genres, New Literacies and Autonomy in Language Learning* (pp. 1–24). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

- Volk, D., & Angelova, M. (2007). Language ideology and the mediation of language choice in peer interactions in a dual-language first grade. *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*, 6(3), 177–199.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MS: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Ware, P. D. (2005). Toward an intercultural stance: Teaching German and English through telecollaboration. *Modern Language Journal*, 89(2), 190–205. Retrieved from <http://llt.msu.edu/vol9num2/ware/>
- Ware, P. D., & O'Dowd, R. (2008). Peer feedback on language form in telecollaboration. *Language Learning & Technology*, 12(1), 43–63.
- Warschauer, M. (2013). Online Learning in Sociocultural Context. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 29(1), 68–88.
- Wenger, E. (1998a). Communities of practice: Learning as a social system. *Systems Thinker*, 9(5), 1–10. Retrieved from <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>
- Wenger, E. (1998b). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E. (2004). Knowledge management as a doughnut: Shaping your knowledge strategy through communities of practice. *Ivey Business Journal*, 68(519), 1–8. Retrieved from <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=f32e8ca8-5559-4515-a94b-96693b254ac2@sessionmgr4001&vid=1&hid=4112>
- Wenger, E. (2006). Communities of practice: a brief introduction. Retrieved from <http://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/06-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf>
- Wenger, E., White, N., & Smith, J. D. (2009). *Digital Habitats: stewarding technology for communities*. Portland, OR: CPsquare.
- Werquin, P. (2007). *Terms, Concepts and Models for Analyzing the Value of Recognition Programmes: RNFIL - Third Meeting of National Representatives and International Organizations. Education And Training*. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/33/58/41834711.pdf>
- Wertsch, J. V. (1985). *Vygotsky and the social formation of mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wong, C., Vrijmoed, L., & Wong, E. (2008). Learning environment for digital natives - Web 2.0 meets globalization. *Hybrid Learning and Education, Proceedings*, 5169, 168–177.

- Wood, D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal Of Child Psychology And Psychiatry*, 17(2), 89–100.
- Ziegler, S. (2007). The (mis)education of Generation M. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 32(1), 69–81. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/17439880601141302>
- Zimmer, M. (2010). “But the data is already public”: On the ethics of research in Facebook. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 12, 313–325. Retrieved from <http://www.sfu.ca/~palys/Zimmer-2010-EthicsOfResearchFromFacebook.pdf>
- Zourou, K. (2012). On the attractiveness of social media for language learning: a look at the state of the art. *Alsic. Apprentissage Des Langues et Systèmes d’Information et de Communication*, 15(1). Retrieved from <http://alsic.revues.org/2436>
- Zourou, K. (2013). Research challenges in informal social networked. *eLearning Papers*, (34), 1–11. Retrieved from http://www.openeducationeuropa.eu/sites/default/files/asset/In-depth_34_4.pdf
- Zourou, K., & Lamy, M.-N. (2013). Social networked game dynamics in web 2.0 language learning communities. *Alsic. Apprentissage Des Langues et Systèmes d’Information et de Communication*, 16(1). Retrieved from <http://alsic.revues.org/2642#tocto2n1>
- Zourou, K., & Loiseau, M. (2013). Bridging design and language interaction and reuse in Livemocha’s culture section. In K. Zourou & M.-N. Lamy (Eds.), *Social networking for language education* (pp. 77–99). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Websites

All links last accessed April 15, 2015

12speak (<http://www.12speak.com/>)

Babbel (<http://www.babbel.com/>)

BBC for English learning (old) (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/>)

BBC for English learning (new) (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/>)

Busuu (<https://www.busuu.com/>)

DailyMotion (<http://www.dailymotion.com/>)

DonQuijote (<http://www.donquijote.com/>)

Elgg (<http://elgg.org>)

Elvin (European languages Virtual Network)

(<http://flexilab.eu/root/web/livingweb.nsf/do?open&lang=en&site=default&page=pilot-elvin>)

English, Baby! (<http://www.englishbaby.com/>)

English Café (<http://www.englishcafe.es/>)

Englishtown (<http://www.englishtown.com/>)

ESL Monkey (<http://eslmonkey.blogspot.com.es/>)

eTandem (<http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/etandem/etindex-en.html>)

eTwinning (<http://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm>)

Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/>)

Forum Romania Italia (<http://www.romania-italia.net/homepage/>)

Forvo (<http://forvo.com>)

Grammar girl (<http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl>)

ICQ (<http://www.icq.com/>)

Impariamo l'italiano (<http://www.impariamoitaliano.com/>)

INTENT project (<http://www.intent-project.eu/intent-project.eu/index.htm>)

Interpals (<http://www.interpals.net/>)

Italien-Facile.com (<http://Italien-Facile.com/>)

Italki (<https://www.italki.com/>)

Lang-8 (<http://lang-8.com/>)

LangMedia (<http://langmedia.fivecolleges.edu/>)

Languageexchange.com (<http://www.languageexchange.com/>)

Languesenligne (<http://languesenligne.blogspot.com/>)

Lingo
(http://www.vxl.cat/sites/default/files/materials/ten_successful_ways_to_motivate_language_learners.pdf) and
(http://eblul.eurolang.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=68&Itemid=37)

Lingozone (<http://www.lingozone.com/>)

LingQ (<http://www.lingq.com/>)

Lingua D project (<http://www.cisi.unito.it/tandem/learning/lingua-d-eng.html>)

LinkYou (<http://www.linkyou.info/>)

Livemocha (new) (<https://learn.livemocha.com/>)

Livemocha (old) (<http://livemocha.com/>)

Mahara (<https://mahara.org/>)

Mahara SpeakApps (<http://mahara.speakapps.org/>)

Meetup groups (<http://www.meetup.com/>)

Memrise (<http://www.memrise.com/>)

Mixi (<https://mixi.jp/>)

MSN (<http://www.msn.com/>)

Mundolatino (<http://www.mundolatino.ru/>)

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (<http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/>)

My Happy Planet (<http://www.myhappyplanet.com>)

MyLanguageExchange.com (<http://www.mylanguageexchange.com/>)

MySpace (<https://myspace.com>)

Ning (<http://www.ning.com/>)

Odnoklassniki (<http://www.odnoklassniki.ru/>)

Orkut (<https://orkut.google.com/>) No longer available except for the archives

Palabea (<http://www.palabea.com/>) No longer available

Parlacatalà (<http://www.parlacatala.org/>)

PenPal World (<http://www.penpalworld.com/>)

Polyglot Club (<http://polyglotclub.com/>)

Prettymay (<http://www.prettymay.net/>)

Real English (<http://www.real-english.com/>)

RenRen (<http://www.renren.com/>)

Researcher's Google page (<https://sites.google.com/site/investigadorauoc/home>)

Ruhr University in Bochum (<http://www.tandemcity.info/>)

SayJack (<http://www.sayjack.com/>)

SharedTalk (<http://www.sharedtalk.com/>)

SixDegrees (<http://sixdegrees.com/>) No longer available

Skype (<http://www.skype.com/>)

SocialGo (<http://www.socialgo.com/>)

SpeakApps (<http://www.speakapps.eu>)

Study Zone (<http://web2.uvcs.uvic.ca/elc/studyzone/>)

SurveyMonkey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com>)

TandemMOOC (<http://mooc.speakapps.org/>)

TandemMOOC Moodle (<http://mooc.speakapps.org/moodle/course/view.php?id=4>)

The Global Language Exchange (<http://language.derekr.com/>)

The Mixxer (<http://www.language-exchanges.org/>)

The Penpals Network (<http://www.tpn.info/>)

TILA (LLP) project (<http://www.tilaproject.eu/>)

Tongueout! (<http://www.tongueout.net/>)

Turkish Class (<http://www.turkishclass.com/>)

Twiducate (<http://www.twiducate.com/>)

Twitter (<https://twitter.com/>)

Urban Dictionary (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/>)

VerbalPlanet (<http://www.verbalplanet.com/>)

VoxSwap (<http://www.voxswap.com/>)

WordReference (<http://www.wordreference.com/>)

World Languages Podcasting (<http://www.worldlanguagespodcasting.com/>)

xLingo (<http://www.xlingo.com/>)

Yabla (<https://www.yabla.com>)

YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/>)

Appendices

Appendix A. Criteria for the selection of the online communities

The criteria displayed in this appendix are representative of an “ideal” and “utopic” community for language learning. The L2 learning communities chosen for this study are *Livemocha* and *Busuu* because they best matched the criteria explained here when the selection occurred.

FORMAL DESCRIPTION

1. COMMUNITY INFORMATION

1.1. Name of the community (if any)

A community/group on a social network usually wants to be identified because this enhances the sense of belonging to a community of people.

1.2. Link

Specific web-address of the community under study and of eventual websites or platforms it relies on (if any).

1.3. Social Network in Use

The community can be hosted in a general social network or might be the social network itself.

2. BEHIND THE COMMUNITY

2.1. Creator/Administrator

Name of the person who created or manages the group or name of the creator of the social network itself if the community taken into consideration is the social network.

2.2. Institution

It refers to the name of the company or University that carried out the educational activity in the community

2.3. Faculty and Department

In case of a previous investigation on the community, field of research related to the study conducted.

2.4. Location

Country (and city) where the study was conducted or simply data about the location of the community's funders.

2.5. Study related (if any)

Reference of any paper, book, article dealing with the community under investigation.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

3.1. Objectives of the group

Assignments of the course, discussion in the L2, finding new language partners

3.2. Subject taught

Usually groups studying an L2 (English, French, Italian, etc.) In case of L2 learning learners' level according to the European Framework.

3.3. Context

Native language, gender of learners, formal-informal context.

3.4. Duration

Period in which the educational activity took place. It can last few months or be an ongoing process.

3.5. Social interest

The main purpose of the communities selected is a shared interest for learning languages through social interaction.

4. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

4.1. Learner role

Autonomy, use of critical skills, initiative taking, adherence to teacher's assignments

4.2. Teacher role

Is the teacher present or absence? Is the teacher simply a guide or a tutor or does he totally control the activities?

4.3 Contact with native speakers

A social network is a favourable context for exchanges between NSs and NNSs because it overcomes time and space distances. This condition should be present in L2 communities.

4.4 Limitations of the community

Avoidance in the use of the TL

4.5 Case personal evaluation

A negative case (and why) or simply a case.

INTERPRETATIVE DESCRIPTION

SECTION A: Learner and pedagogical usability issues

1. Learner autonomy

1.1. Content creation

Use of “learner generated content”. The learners’ attitude in creating something on their own is a sign of autonomy. Being these platforms interactive and oriented to social media, learners should have the possibility to generate lesson contents themselves, through the use of downloadable podcasts, or .pdf files for listening skills and word recognition for example. This bottom-up creation of content adds value to learners’ creativity and collaboration among peers.

- Profile providing a link to a personal blog or a wiki
- To write notes in a less structured and controlled environment.
- Keeping a public diary open to suggestions and comments of peers.
- Videomaking
- Creation of class supports like flashcards
- Storytelling
- To author their own content
- Digital storytelling “to speak” in front of the group

1.2. Critical skills (Halvorsen, 2009)

Related to the ability to source information in online navigation and to sort relevant and irrelevant material, ability to analyse and discern relevant information and content. Meta-awareness of the type of positive impact that SNS could potentially have on their own language learning.

This category consists of:

1.2.1. Computer literacy

Technical expertise. Ability to use the computer efficiently, cutting and pasting, saving, storing, managing data, tags.

1.2.2. Online literacy

(or hyperliteracy, given that the integration of other media into texts complicates further the notion of literacy).

- Use of tagging. Shared tagging is a bookmarking process that allows students to personally assign key words or phrases to information they find on the web and it is not possible to tag a website without the ability to critically analyse its contents accessing and assessing the information found online. It helps learners orientating amidst the enormous amount of information available online. The act of creating tags requires critical and reflective reading skills. Action derived: choosing topics of personal interest to share
- Use of social media and its tools (*Skype, MSN*) to extend the conversation originated on the SNS
- Mash-up. Integration of other media and platforms and of secondary tools
- Import content from other sources
- Written or oral reflections on metalinguistic competence, awareness of their learning process and sense of responsibility for their own learning
- Written or oral reflections on the degree of independence that learners perceive they have in comparison with the traditional class tools.

1.3. Self-organization

- Study habits, day-to-day routines, scheduling (or random activities?)

1.4. Initiative taking

- Selecting relevant information
- Critically interpreting and analysing the sociocultural context
- Sharing knowledge and information

- Negotiating in horizontal contexts, avoiding hierarchical connections and exchanges of knowledge
- Working in groups and collaboratively
- Enhancing communication and interpersonal skills

2. Identity formation

2.1. Personal trustiness, confidence, self-perception

It deals with the way learners show themselves to the community and with the community response to learner's actions.

2.2. Self-harvesting

Learners create and express themselves online through the customization of their profile pages and are interested in gaining insights into the personalities of other students in a way that would not otherwise happen in a traditional classroom environment

- Textual behaviours (status updates, comments, likes).
- Providing more or less detailed explanation of interests, information about themselves, hobbies, political tendencies in the required fields, psychological tests' results, photos, videos, bookshelf, music selection, personalized friend lists, groups' belonging.
- These actions, especially if taken in the L2, can show if learners are shaping a sense of "secondary Italian identity"

2.3. Self-regulation (and intercultural competence)

In a wide and variegated sociocultural environment learners have to develop intercultural skills and be able to overcome cultural, gender, religion barriers. This is a sign of personal growth and maturity in their identity building and behaviours as well as of personal achievement (McBride, 2009). Learning an L2 is a social act and implies the disclosure of one's identity and social context as well as the interpretation of the social norms and values of the context surrounding the language partner (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999; Liddicoat, 2002). This process requires collaboration, sensitivity and maturity by the partners involved in the conversation. The intercultural competence can be learned in these communities when the two tandem partners notice and compare their different practices and cultures. In addition, learners' online identity is constantly at stake when interacting in these communities because they have the possibility to share their foreign culture

through pictures, storytelling, links, etc. They have a learner profile and can browse through other learners' profiles and evaluate if another learner is trustworthy and adequate for being a language partner.

- Respect for the netiquette
- Respect and interest in intercultural differences
- Sense of polite conviviality

2.4. Learning outcomes

- Avoiding fossilization on the interlanguage
- No topic avoidance
- No sentence structure avoidance

SECTION B: Social relations and social interaction issues

NS and NNS meeting places for peer work.

One of the most important features taken into account for this selection, which is particularly intriguing in the case of L2 learning, is the opportunity for users to interact with NSs of their TL. NNSs meet NSs of the TL and, in turn, offer their L1 in exchange. In this way, learners have at the same time the opportunity to become teachers of their own language.

3.1. Collaboration

This category shows the level of cross-linking, if the students feel a shared sense of community and the level of their presence online. Co-creation of shared understanding.

There are three interactions modes that characterise collaboration: coordination, cooperation and reflective communication (Engeström, 2008:50)

Into this category also fit those elements that enhance competition among learners, which works in synergy with the collaboration among them. These communities are often gaming environments provided of a score/rating system that works efficiently as motivation driver, when submitting and reviewing exercises, favour cooperation. When publishing, doing and reviewing exercises learners are aware of the fact that their reputation is at stake and try to play well their role and their performance inside the community.

- Planning jointly
- Pooling resources
- Evaluating outcomes together

- Use of collaborative writing technologies and integration with SNS (Google Docs, wikis)
- Problem solving
- Modification of materials and digital artefacts, such as task guidelines, instructions, students' postings on a discussion board (Blin & Appel, 2011)
- Construction of a collective text
- Presence of transitions from coordination to cooperation and reflective communication (*Blin & Appel, 2011; Engeström, 2008*)
- Co-construction of content, online collaborative writing. Learners invent and build a story in *the L2* together or creation of new lesson content and activities together
- Opportunities for critical discussions in the L2 in forums, groups and debates
- Creating knowledge in user-defined or negotiated contexts
- Presence of a rewarding system
- Presence of a rating system
- Peer review/Expert review
- System of bottom-up evaluation
- Reputation system-social capital
- Weekly progress report
- Online gaming

3.2. Coordination mode

Harmonious functioning of parts for effective results. Helping each other but not changing the basic way of learning. Focus on individual roles.

Actors focus performing successfully the tasks assigned according to a given script (Blin & Appel, 2011; Engeström, 2008)

- Sharing information (Files, opinions, stories, pictures)
- Making referrals
- Coordinating schedules
- Listing each other's events in newsletter
- Make initial compromises
- Learners write and revise individual and group essays, and comment on peer's essays. They are focused on individual roles.

- Peer support: asking/offering help
- Asking for teacher's support: e.g. to write a mail to the teacher/tutor for clarifications, doubts, and perplexities
- Community review
- Review in pairs

3.3. Cooperation mode

Common effort and association for the purpose of common benefit. Helping each other in specific ways.

Actors focus on a shared problem or on a task trying to find a way to solve it. They might deviate from the normal script but not explicitly (Blin & Appel, 2011; Engeström, 2008)

- Developing a community-based coalition to address a need
- Beginning to develop trust and see better ways of doing things
- Real time decision-making
- Collective corrections of the errors signalled by the teacher instead of focusing on individual essays. Nevertheless, the final essay has to have an ordered structure and cohesion.
- Looking through student comments and feedback

3.4. Reflective communication mode

Team members reconceptualise their organization and interaction in relation to their shared object (Blin & Appel, 2011; Engeström, 2008)

- Defining a longer term shared object
- Working on how to improve the final essay altogether
- Students reflecting and questioning on their language use and solve language problems
- Negotiation of meaning (What do you mean by that? To reformulate hypotheses)

4. Motivation

This category includes those elements that show learners' commitment and trust to the activity of L2 learning on SNS over time.

- Promptness and willingness to interact with their peers
- Willingness to interact with NSs of the TL
- Asking for peer support
- Frequency of interventions per week
- Frequency of status updates per week
- Number, quality and length of interventions
- Providing links to other webpages
- Providing and sharing new insights for L2 learning
- To share useful content for L2 learning
- To make new native friends in the social networks (social networking)
- Metalinguistic reflections
- Prompt reactions to any rewarding system provided
- Interest in peers' web profiles and asking for information and/or suggestions after having read their pages (in order to improve one's profile)

SECTION C: Environment and technical usability issues

5. Platform system

These communities should be provided with communication tools that allow users to learn a new language with a NS of that given language and, at the same time, teaching their native languages during online and often real-time exchanges of languages. These tandem exchanges should take place in a social, collaborative environment through the use of video, audio, or text-based chat. For this reason, this form of interaction has been defined as “eTandem”²⁵ (Brammerts, 1994).

This type of interaction gives the users the possibility to learn the conversational aspects of language and to empower not only written but also oral skills, which is possible mainly when visiting the foreign country where the language is spoken.

The platform should provide learners not only with the connections to social web resources, but also with educational tools specifically designed for learning, such as a virtual classroom, with blackboard tools, lessons, assignments, corrections. The lessons should be organized in order to favour the learning of all four language skills, according to the parameters of the European Framework, with specific exercises to develop listen-

²⁵ Term first used in 1994 by Brammerts at the seminar for language training research at Ruhr University in Bochum (<http://www.tandemcity.info/>).

ing, writing, reading and speaking (speaking production and speaking interaction) skills. The platform should also have newsfeed and constant update of students' progress and of the progress of the other learners.

5.1. Main features

- Information management (in terms of functionality and resources management)
- Information visualization/infovis (page display, chromatic/monochromatic)
- Powerful API (e.g. a map)
- User friendliness
- Forms of synchronous communication (it not only includes a chat but also the social media that tend to synchronicity like *Twitter* or blogs)
- Forms of asynchronous communication
- Activity flux. The online communities should be recent and boast a large and active population. In fact, users should regularly log in to interact and learn from each other.

5.2. RSS feeds (in)

Embedded content using RSS feeds allow the incorporation of relevant accounting news from different sources in the web into the classroom. This feature is especially significant in the project because it incorporates, in a visible space of the network, a set of updated international accounting news.

It would contribute to promote multilingual learning that is especially relevant for the learning process and for accounting education in general

5.3. RSS feeds (out)

Content published in the network can be accessed via RSS or via emails alerts. Alerts are intended to update students about the content of the course. They can choose the type of information to be reported.

5.4. Discussion Forum

The discussion forum constitutes a space, organized by categories, where information and attachments can be made accessible to the social network. Forum topic creation can be open to all the members or limited to the instructor. This widget usually occupies the most visible position in the Home Page of the network.

Used for materials, discussions, indications, assignments, topic creation

5.5. Communities of interest

Groups can be created inside the social network with images, membership, comments and a discussion forum. This feature will be displayed if students desire to share a private space for specific members when doing group work.

5.6. Blogs

Many member of the social network has a blog. Blogs can function as reflective diaries, but also as conversational centrepieces. The social network should permit members to express themselves, with due respect, and to create their digital identity.

5.7. Profile page

Each member has a personal page that is customizable. Content published on the page can be open to all the members or be limited to friends. “My page” allows students to develop their own digital identity and to build their own network inside the SNS by becoming friends of other members.

5.8. Embedded applications

The social network allows the embedding of widgets and content from other web services provider. This feature will allow the inclusion of maps, calendars, videos, pictures, etc. and provides additional possibilities to students for customizing their own page.

5.9. Other features included

Additional features facilitate communication and the development of social relationships while learning.

A Google spreadsheet to communicate marks at the end of the learning process, allowing students to leave their comments and provide feedback for future courses.

Events, birthday reminders, notes, etc.

6. Topography:

This category refers to the network visualization, it shows the establishment of contact with members and the creation of a sense of community.

It should help reply the following questions:

- How highly connected is an entity within a network?
- What is an entity's overall importance in a network?
- How central is an entity within a network?
- How does information flow within a network?

6.1. Approximate number of users_____

6.2. Average age of users_____

6.3. Horizontal Network

Public space like *Facebook* where you are connected because you are friends and not because there are niche interests

6.4. Vertical Network

YouTube. They are closed and focalised on a topic. Communities focalised on a niche interest. We can be connected not just because we are friends.

6.5. Transversal network

A community in the community, a new social network of people grouped by the same interest in a horizontal place, a vertical place in a horizontal place.

It can be:

META/ A vertical community grows and lives in horizontal networks

i.e. Forms of meta communities. Twitter hashtags, *Facebook* groups, *Flickr* groups, *FriendFeed* rooms, *Impariamo l'Italiano* group on *Facebook*.

LAYER/ A vertical community lives alone with a full integration of horizontal networks

i.e. *Farmville*

6.6. Aim

- Strengthening already existing social bonds “social network site” (boyd & Ellison, 2007)
- Intertwining new relationships “social networking site” (boyd & Ellison, 2007)

6.7. Time

- More time for reflection given that the information persist on the wall. As a consequence, long-term multimedia attention.

- More impulsive. Information flows very fast and learners have to read it in real time, otherwise they lose it. Critical skills have to adapt to this speed. As a consequence, more instantaneous and fragmented attention

6.8. Memory

- The platform archives and saves documents. It has a long-term memory
- The platform is focused on real time actions. It has a short-term memory

6.9. Cognition

- Symbolic hypersensitivity: quick reply to iconic stimuli
- Textual hypersensitivity: ability to extract quickly relevant notes

6.10. Advertising

- Social advertising. It promotes social branding
- Covert advertising. It promotes personal branding and voice marketing

7. Platform system under the L2 learning point of view

7.1. L2 Skills enhanced

- Reading
- Writing
- Listening
- Speaking
 - Speaking production
 - Speaking interaction

7.2. Languages in use

7.3. Presence of reliable translation tools

7.4. Video chat and possibility to record the conversation

7.5. Keyboard facilities for other alphabets

7.6. Pedagogical tasks

7.7. Possibility's for learners' joint creation of an artefact

7.8. Hyper-textual learning content

Appendix B. The online survey

Exit this survey



Language Learning in Online Communities_EN

Introduction



Dear language learner,

Thank you for participating in this online survey conducted by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya for language learners in online social communities.

Through this questionnaire, which lasts approximately 10 minutes, we would like to learn about your language experience on Livemocha.

You will benefit from it because the results will help us to develop a research project on how to get the most out of learning a language with an online community.

Your participation is totally voluntary and this questionnaire is anonymous in order to respect your privacy according to current laws and regulations.

Please, complete this questionnaire only if you are already 18 years old or over.

Next

1. Language experience

40%

Firstly, we would like to know something about your linguistic background

***1. What is your main (native) language? (If you do not find it in the list, select "other" and write the language in the box provided below)**

***2. Have you ever lived abroad?**

- Yes
 No

***3. Do you have any friends/contacts with whom you sometimes practice a foreign language?**

- I have no friends to practice a foreign language
 Yes, I have both "offline" and "online" friends to practice a foreign language
 Yes, I only have "offline" friends to practice a foreign language
 Yes, I only have "online" friends to practice a foreign language

***4. What languages are you learning on Livemocha? Tick all that apply**

- English
 Spanish
 Chinese
 Arabic
 French
 Italian
 German
 Japanese
 Other (Please Specify)

Prev

Next

Language Learning in Online Communities_EN

2. Livemocha experience



Next are some questions about your language learning in Livemocha online community

***5. How long have you been a member of Livemocha?**

***6. How often do you login to your Livemocha account?**

- Daily
- More than three times a week
- Once or twice a week
- Less than once a week
- Approximately once or twice a month
- I have not logged in for months

***7. Why are you learning languages on Livemocha? Tick all that apply**

- I am shy and I feel less nervous learning a language online
- I like Livemocha's self-paced lessons because I can organise my time in a flexible way
- I do not want to spend much money for a language course
- On Livemocha I can easily meet native speakers of the language I am learning
- I think Livemocha courses are interesting and stimulating
- I feel helpful because I can help the people who want to learn my language
- Other (Please Specify)

*** 8. Which of the following actions have you taken in the community? Tick all that apply**

- I have completed a whole course
- I have won the golden medal
- I have reviewed both written and audio exercises submitted by other learners
- I have created flashcards
- I have tried the text and/or the video chat
- I have done translations for the community
- I have shared pictures
- I have become a "Top 100 Student"
- I have shared my Livemocha activity on Facebook through the button
- Other (please specify)

*** 9. How would you rate the importance of the following aspects when you learn a language in this online community? (Consider 1 the least important aspect and 5 the most important).**

| | 1- the least important | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5- the most important |
|--|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| I have my exercises revised by native people | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I give revisions to the other learners | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I use the translation tool in case of doubts | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I can use text chat and video chat to talk with natives | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I take courses that are organised into units and lessons | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

*** 10. Do you feel your language learning has benefited from the experience in the community?**

- Yes, I do
- No, I don't
- Partially
- Too early to say, I prefer to wait before giving an answer

Prev

Next

Language Learning in Online Communities_EN

3. Livemocha experience more in depth



Before the conclusion, some more specific questions about you and the community

*** 11. I have benefited from the experience in the community especially because (Tick all that apply):**

- I feel more comfortable when I speak the language
- I feel more comfortable when I write the language
- I have clarified doubts related to grammar structures
- I have enriched my vocabulary
- I have reduced my level of anxiety when I use the language
- My motivation for language learning has increased
- Other (please specify)

*** 12. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each item using the following scale (Tick one response for each item)**

| | Strongly Agree :)) | Agree :) | Neutral - | Disagree :(| Strongly Disagree :((|
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| The sense of belonging to an online community increases one's willingness to study | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Being part of an online community in a daily routine helps language learning | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Learning in an online community is much more entertaining than learning in a traditional class | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

***13. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each item using the following scale (Tick one response for each item)**

| | Strongly Agree :)) | Agree :) | Neutral - | Disagree :(| Strongly Disagree :((|
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| The design (the organization of the website content) in Livemocha is clear | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| There is much possibility of spontaneous interaction with the users | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| The lesson content is stimulating and interesting | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| The community looks much more like a social network than like a learning place | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Flashcards and learning contents are accurate and do not present mistakes related to pronunciation and translation | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

14. If you could, how would you improve Livemocha for a more effective language learning process? This question is OPTIONAL

15. Are you a member of any of these online communities for language learning?

| | Yes, I'm an active member | Yes, I'm a passive member | No, I'm not |
|---------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| Palabea | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Babbel | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Busuu | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Other | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

(please specify)

Prev

Next

Language Learning in Online Communities_EN

4. Demographic questions



Last are some demographic questions that will be used for classification purposes only

***16. Gender**

- Male
- Female

***17. Age**

***18. Indicate your country of origin. If you do not find it in the list, write it in the box below.**

***19. What is the highest level of education which you have completed to date?**

- Primary Education
- Secondary Education
- Tertiary Education (Universities/Institutes of technology)
- Other (please specify)
- Postgraduate Studies
- PhD

***20. How would you describe your present principal status?**

- Working for payment or profit (full-time)
- Working for payment or profit (part-time)
- Looking for first regular job
- Unemployed
- Other (please specify)
- Full-time student or pupil
- Looking after home/family
- Retired from employment
- Unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability

21. Is there anything else related to POSITIVE aspects of online language learning on Livemocha that you would like to describe for us to think about? This question is OPTIONAL

22. Is there anything else related to NEGATIVE aspects of online language learning on Livemocha that you would like to describe for us to think about? This question is OPTIONAL

Appendix C. Script of the semi-structured interviews

1st part semi-structured INTERVIEW

1. Regarding students' language background

1. Tell me a bit about the languages that are part of your life, the languages you have studied, you are studying and the languages you would like to learn.
2. Tell me about your experiences in foreign countries where they speak a language different from yours. Have you ever lived abroad? How long? What languages did you learn?
3. Now tell me about your network of language friends. Do you have pen-friends or fiends for language exchange? Offline or online? How is your network structured? Do you also know any other platforms? Are you a user?

2. Regarding the way to use the platform

1. What languages are you learning on the platform?
2. What's your level? Do you also have language certifications? Have you taken any course?
3. Are you also "teaching" any language on the platform? What languages? Your native language?
4. Why are you learning on the platform? What are the main reasons? Shyness, flexibility, time, it's free, it's easy to find native speakers, the courses are interesting, you can help people learn.
5. What courses are you taking? What courses have you taken? Have you completed them? Have you won anything? Golden, silver medal? Have you ever turned into student or teacher of the week, month? What are your achievements?
6. What features of the platforms have you already discovered or you would like to explore better? (Translation tool, exercise revision, flashcards, chat, translations for the community). Why didn't you do it before? What's your favourite activity on the platform? What do you usually do?

(Education, work, age)...further in the interview at the right moment

3. Regarding the time-factor on the platform

1. Since when have you been a member of the platform?
2. How often do you log in?
3. Is it a habit? Do you have a specific time or day?
4. Do you think your language progress might benefit in some way over time? What skills do you think you might develop in particular? (Speaking, listening, writing, reading, grammar, vocabulary)...

4. Regarding perception and personal evaluation

1. Do you feel you have benefited from your learning experience in the community? Why? How?
2. When you learn on the platform do you perceive a community of learners? Or a social network like *Facebook*? How do you perceive this environment?
3. Tell me how you would improve the platform if you could. Are there any aspects you don't like? (Quality of revisions, studying material, design, organization, etc.)
4. On the contrary, what aspects do you like most about your language learning on the platform?

2nd part semi-structured INTERACTION INTERVIEW

5. Regarding the interactions with the other learners on the platform

1. Did you experience any difficulties in getting acquainted with your friends in the community? Among these friends is there someone that you know personally in your offline life? Did you already know them before signing up on the platform? Or did you meet them after having met them online?
2. Tell me a bit about your personal online network in *Livemocha*, what it is made of, how many friends you have, their nationality, if you add people or you are added, if you usually talk or send them messages.
3. Do you record the conversations with your friends on the platform? Have you ever copied and pasted private messages or conversations from the text-chat?
4. Do you have regular conversations with someone?
5. When did you have contact with A last time?
6. How did you have contact (*Livemocha* textual chat, video chat, *Skype*)?
7. Do you remember what you talked about?
8. What languages did you use when you spoke to A?
9. What languages did A use when A spoke to you?

10. (maybe sometimes) Are you aware of any factors that influenced the choice of language?
11. When you spoke to A in _____(target language), did you have any difficulties in communicating with A?
12. When A spoke to you in _____(target language), did you have any difficulties in communicating with A?
13. How did you feel when you talked with A?
14. Were you satisfied with the communication with A? (Why? Why not?)
15. Before you had contact with A, did you prepare (expect) anything regarding language use?
16. How often are you in contact with A?
17. Do you use _____(target language) with non-(target language) native people?
18. What did you do last time?
19. What did you talk about?
20. Did you have any problems in communicating with him/her in _____(target language)?

Appendix D. The informed consent



Dear _____,

Thank you for responding to my invitation to participate in this study. This email provides information about the nature of the research project and the procedures.

Benefits of the research: This research will examine the point of view of second language learners in their everyday experiences of using social network sites for language learning. The research is expected to be a further contribution to the understanding of the important changes occurring in informal second language learning with the arrival of the Internet and online communities in particular. Therefore, given the newness of research on these issues, an analysis of affordances and constraints of online communities is required to give learners the opportunity to get the most out of their learning experience in such environments. The importance played by this research is recognised by the current policies undertaken by the European Union governance that are oriented towards the development of more personalised and learner-centred perspective educational systems, and towards second language learning enhancement in informal contexts, in line with the objectives of lifelong learning.

It is therefore an opportune time to investigate how second language learners take advantage of the learning opportunities provided by social networks sites by analysing their social interactions in their language networks. In relation to this, one of the research objectives is the development of guidelines addressed to learners themselves and suggesting how to improve the quality of their interaction under both a technical and a pedagogical point of view.

If you agree to participate, you will be requested to do the following:

- Respond to this email indicating that you have read and understood the purpose of this study, that you have understood your rights as a participant, and agree to participate. Then, fill in the form attached below and send it back to me.
- Participate in an online interview that will require approximately 15-30 minutes of your time.

Thank you.

Regards,

Maria Luisa Malerba

The Researcher

Informed Consent

I, _____, agree to participate in the investigation *Second Language Learning on Social Network Sites. Informal Online Interactions*, conducted by Maria Luisa Malerba, of the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute (IN3), Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), (Barcelona, Spain).

I am aware that the purpose of the research is to develop new insights into the use of social network sites for second language learning by online learners in their online informal chats. In particular, the project examines how second language use and selection is socially and contextually constructed and negotiated in these environments also for long-term learning outcomes.

I am aware and I accept that my participation will consist essentially of some interviews (they might range from 1 up to 4) sessions during one 9-month period of time which will last for approximately 15-30 minutes. During these interviews, I will be asked questions from the Researcher about how I use the social network site for language learning and how my network of language partners is structured. I will also be requested to provide the Researcher with some extracts from my online conversations with other members of the social network.

I am aware that no sensitive data or information will be stored or/and treated for the present research in any possible way.

I am aware and I accept that the contents of this research will be used by the Researcher only for the purposes of her academic research, and that no personal information will be treated outside of the academic environment and will be only used with colleagues for academic conferences and/or in academic publications.

I am aware and I accept that the information collected will remain strictly confidential and that my anonymity will be respected by cloaking my real name through the use of pseudonyms, and by not disclosing any personal information that could reveal my real identity.

I am aware and I accept that I can choose the methods in which the interviews will take place, which can include audio tape-recording or note-taking.

I am aware and I accept that I can choose whether to allow the digital videography, the tape-recording and the digital data and/or information from the online conversations (both video and textual) to be used in conference presentations and to be published.

I am aware and I accept that my anonymity will be maintained and that, should any real name appear in the information collected, it will be edited out. Digital video recordings, tape recordings of interviews and other information collected will be kept locked in the researcher's office and personal computer in a secure manner.

I am aware and I accept that no personal information will be treated outside of the academic environment and research team and that it will be destroyed after a period of five years from the thesis publication.

I am aware and I accept that I am also free to withdraw from the project at any time, before or during the interview, refuse to participate and refuse to answer particular questions.

At the end of this form are the appropriate permissions for these activities.

Any information about my rights as a research participant may be addressed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for human subjects' research.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which I may keep.

If I have any questions about the conduct of the research project, I may contact the Researcher at the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute, Edifici Media-TIC, c/Roc Boronat, 117, 08018 Barcelona. Tel. 93 450 52 81; fax 93 450 52 01; e-mail: mmalerba@uoc.edu

Researcher's signature

Date

Research Subject's signature

Date

I consent to be recorded

Research subject's initials

I do not consent to be recorded

Research subject's initials

I consent to allowing the data collected to be presented at academic conferences and used for academic publications

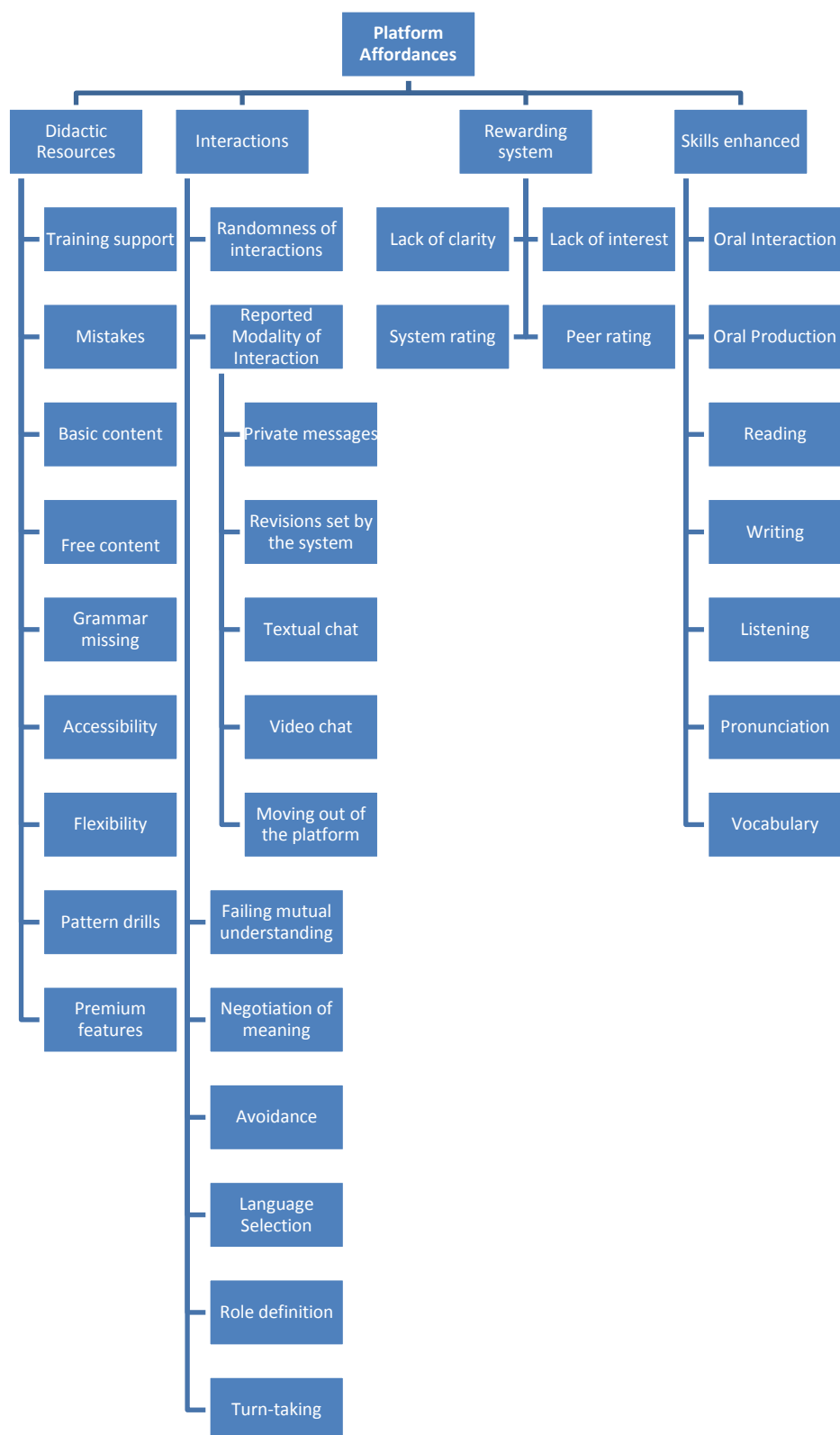
Research subject's initials

I do not consent to allowing the data collected to be presented at academic conferences and used for academic publications

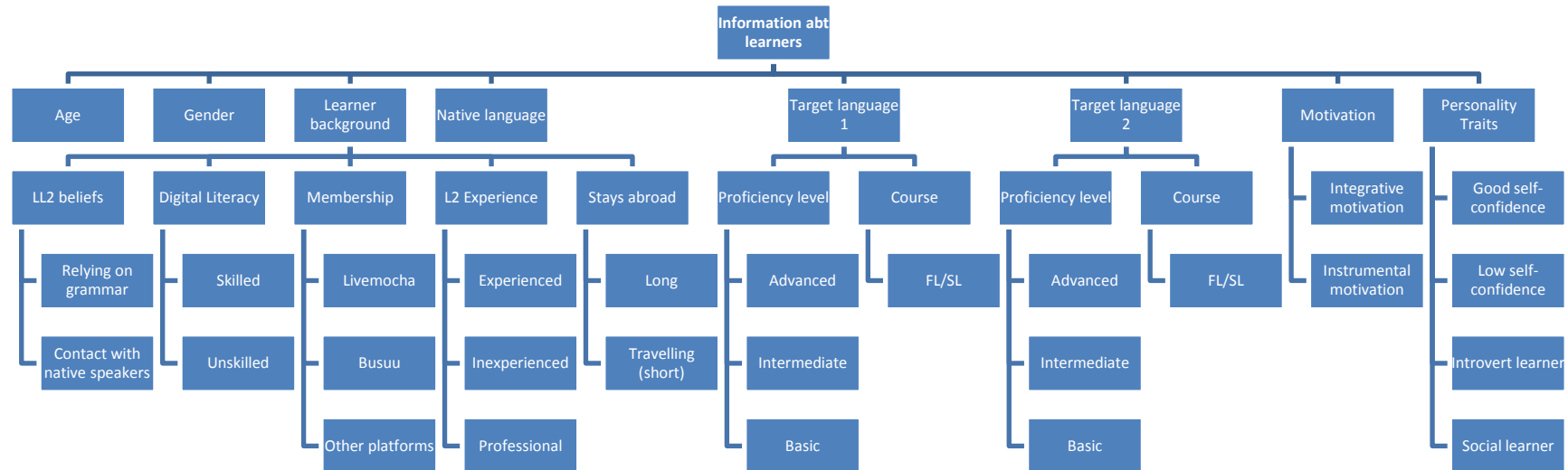
Research subject's initials

Appendix E. Codification in Atlas.ti

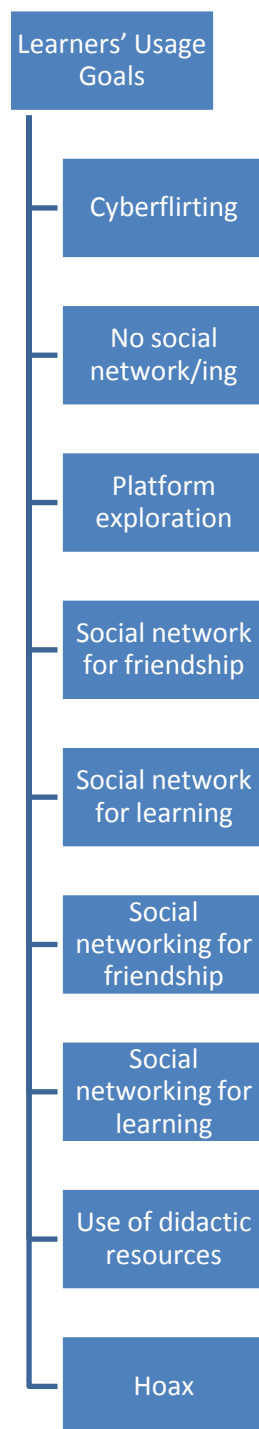
1st family of codes: Platform affordances



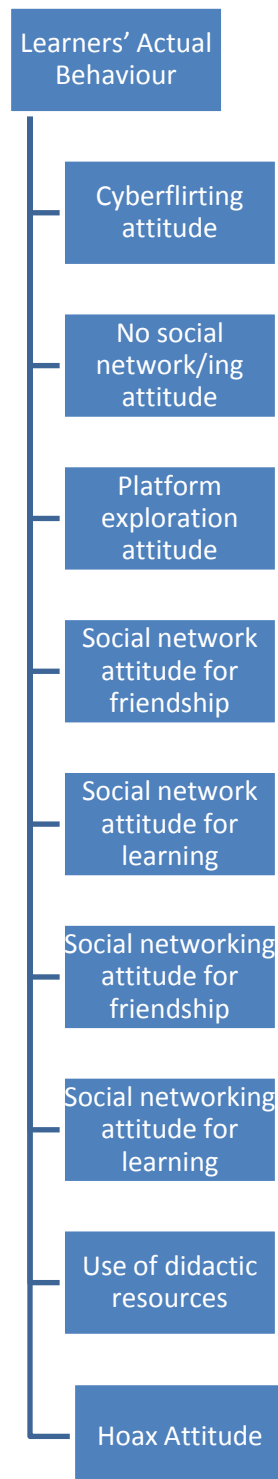
2nd family of codes: Information about learners



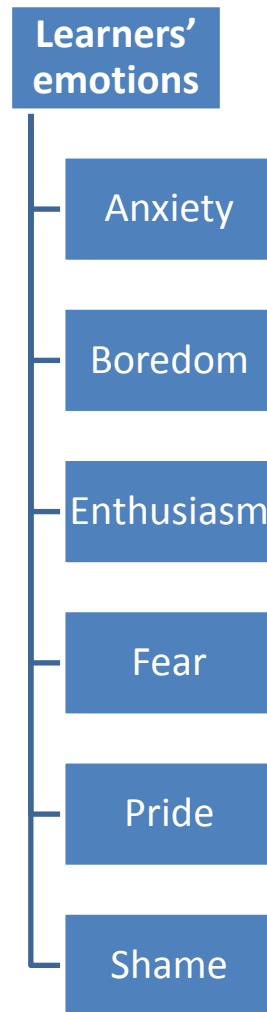
3rd family of codes: Learners' usage goals



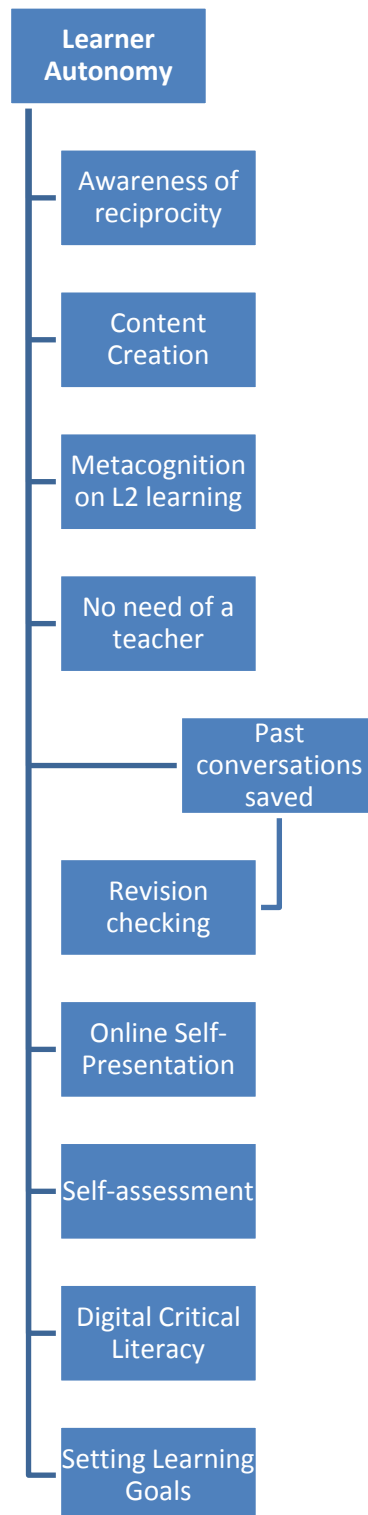
4th family of codes: Learners' actual behaviours



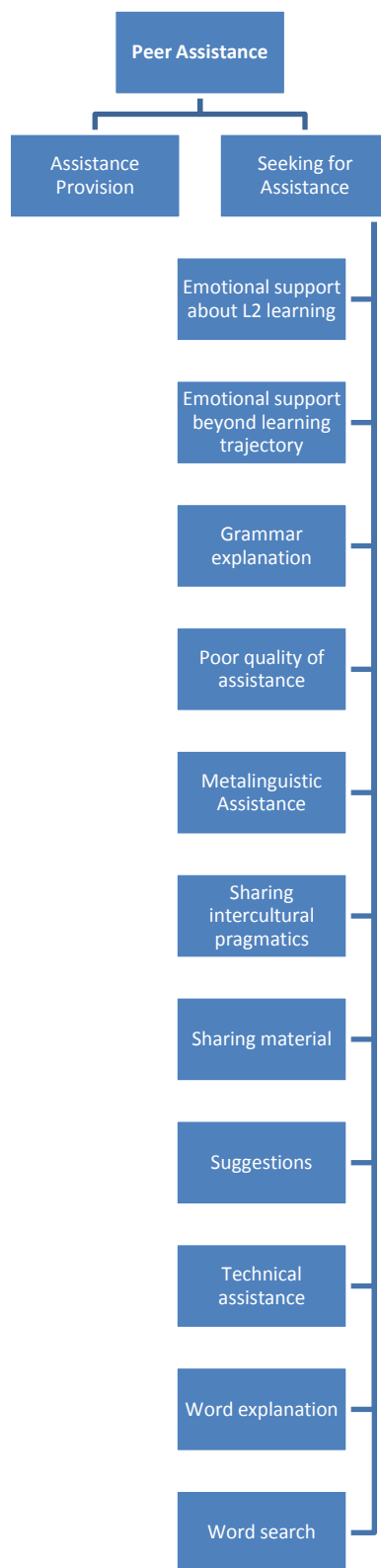
5th family of codes: Learners' emotions



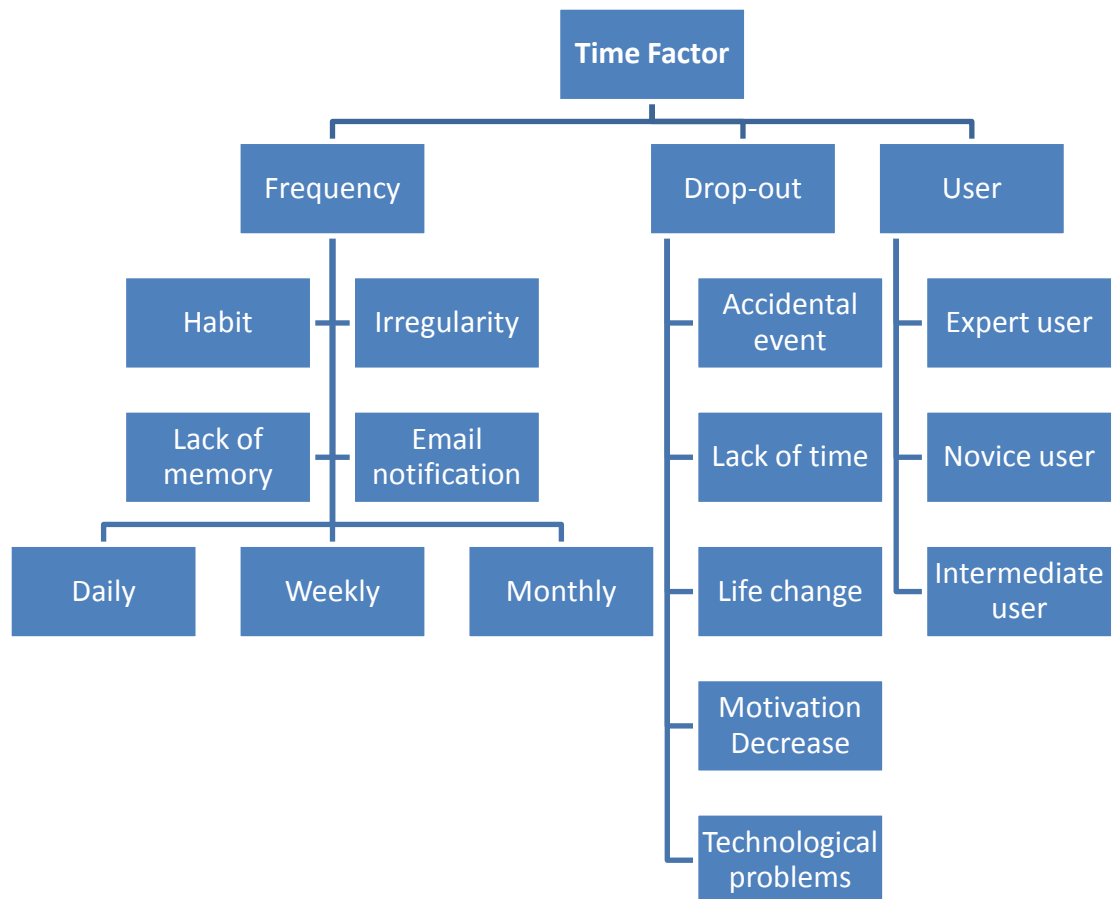
6th family of codes: Learner autonomy



7th family of codes: Peer Assistance



8th family of codes: Time Factor



Appendix F. Script of the 2nd cycle of interviews to *Livemocha* and *Busuu* users

Hi,

I am Maria Luisa Malerba and I interviewed you some months ago about your language learning experience in social networks like *Livemocha* and *Busuu*.

You helped me a lot because you replied very important questions for my investigation and I thank you a lot for your kind help.

In these days I am carrying out the second and last cycle of interviews because I am very curious to know more about my interviewees' learning process in social networks and its evolution over time.

I would be very grateful if you could answer the following questions and send it to me as soon as possible to my email address (mmalerba@uoc.edu). If you wish, instead of typing the answers, you could reply orally and send me an audio file.

Hoping I am not disturbing you, I thank you again for your fundamental help and I wish you all the best with you language learning process.

QUESTIONS:

1. When did you sign up the platform (*Busuu* and/or *Livemocha*) last time?
2. Is your engagement to the platform maintained constant, increased or decreased over time? Why? How frequently do you connect now?
3. Did you discover something new about the platform?
4. Tell me how you developed your network of friends on the platform.
5. What changes occurred since the last time I interviewed you? What skills do you think you have developed in particular?

Appendix G. Script of the recall interviews for the case studies

GENERAL QUESTIONS:

1. When did you sign up the platform last time?
2. Is your engagement to the platform maintained constant, increased or decreased over time? Why? How frequently do you connect now?
3. Did you discover something new about the platform?
4. Tell me how you developed your network of friends on the platform.
5. What changes occurred since the last time I interviewed you? What skills do you think you have developed in particular?

PERSONALIZED QUESTIONS:

1. Are you still in touch with your friend from X? In *Livemocha*?
2. Who is the contact with whom you feel you learned more? Why?
3. When was the last time you talked to X?
4. Is your commitment to learning Spanish still high after taking the exam?

INTERACTIONS:

Did you notice/discover something in terms of languages? If yes, what?

Did you see any improvements in you Spanish with X? What about his/her English?

Correction of “X”. How do you feel when you have to correct him/her?

Do you think he/she expected more help from you?

Did you expect more corrections from him/her? What do you think of his/her corrections?

Were you more interested in chatting or in learning with him/her?

In the conversation with X about X what happened?

In the conversation with X about the word “X” what happened? What word you could not remember? Did s/he check it on the dictionary?

Who decides to switch the language and why?

Appendix H. Observations about the interview phase. Excerpts from the researcher's diary

Before the interviews:

It is very important that the participants to the study see the researcher online in *Skype* frequently and feel his/her presence. Considering that the participants involved in this study were from around the world, the researcher spent long time in *Skype*. This contributed to the creation of trust towards the figure of the researcher and of the investigation itself.

- When the researcher has created his own list of contacts in *Skype*, not only does he need to make the participants feel his presence, but he also should write his personal mood sentence in *Skype*. It can be a sentence related to language learning such as: “*Learn a new language and get a new soul!*” (in this way the researcher creates “sympathy” with the participants) or a sentence indicating the stage of the investigation he is in, for instance “*Transcriptions of your interviews in progress. Thanks again for the precious information you gave me :)*”. In other words, the researcher should keep in contact with the participants and inform them about the investigation process periodically and informally.

The researcher is sometimes contacted by some of the interviewees for reasons that go beyond the investigation. The researcher has to be friendly but always maintain professional detachment.

- When the interviewees were learners of Italian, Spanish and/or English, some of them will inevitably mistake the researcher either for a teacher or for a possible language partner of the online communities to practice the TL with. When asked to practice the language or to give language class, the researcher should decline the offer gently mentioning that this would influence the process of investigation.

The researcher, when contacted without having arranged a time, has to show that s/he is working and is deeply involved in the process of investigation. However, s/he has to adopt always good manners and be available.

The researcher has to practice his listening skills during the everyday conversations before starting the interview phase.

The researcher himself could be victim of hoaxing and cyberflirting by one of the online participants. Should the researcher perceive any signs of the above, s/he should exclude the participant from the investigation.

Here follow observations related to the different techniques adopted during the interview phase:

Interviews conducted in *Skype* through an audiocall. In these interviews, the researcher has the freedom to take notes or to look at the script and reflect on the next question without the participant being aware of it. The researcher has to employ backchannels to facilitate the interviewees and to make them feel at ease. At the same time, he has to be careful that these backchannels are not interpreted as a signal of stop by the interlocutor. The researcher has to make sure that the online connection works well. If the connection is not powerful, the sound arrives later and voices are overlapped. In this case, the researcher might interrupt the interviewee's speech.

Interviews conducted in *Skype* through a videocall. These interviews have the disadvantage that the researcher cannot easily look at the script and think about the next question because he has to smile and nod often. The advantage of these interviews is that there are less risks of interrupting the interlocutor. The visual input tells the researcher if the interviewee has answered the question and has finished his talk.

Interviews conducted through the textual chat. These interviews take a very long time and exhaust the participants, who have to type in order to reply the questions. The researcher did not show the script since the beginning of the interviews but preferred to ask each question at a time. But the researcher had to indicate the progress of the interview and the approximate duration. It is very common to split them into two or three sessions, which might imply the risk of not finding the participant available or in the mood on the day arranged for another session. If the interviews are conducted in *Skype* textual chat, the researcher can see that the participant is typing. This will prevent him from interrupting the participant. Instead, the interviews conducted on textual chats where it is not possible to see if the other user is typing are more complex because they might cause overlapping and misunderstandings. The interviews conducted in a textual chat usually elicit less information than videocall and audiocall interviews.

Interviews submitted by email. Emails are more similar to an open questionnaire and in this investigation they elicited less information than the textual chat. It was the technique that I adopted as the last option with those participants who were particularly busy or

suspicious and I did not hide to the participants that my preferred techniques were audio and videocall to obtain more information about them. There is an advantage using the email technique: the participants have the script with the questions and they answer the questions through asynchronous modalities, which means that they can reflect on the answers in advance. But the researcher will receive detailed answers only in the case of very motivated people (teachers, for instance). Usually the answers are short and the researcher often does not have the possibility to go deeper in the interview.

The language during the interview:

If the researcher is interviewing a participant whose L1 is different from the L1 of the researcher, there are several aspects to take into consideration:

- In the case the interviewer speaks (because he is a NS of it or because he is proficient) the TL of the interviewee (being the interviewee a less proficient speaker), the interviewer/researcher has to be careful. On the one hand, there is a motivational factor pushing the interviewee doing the interview (the possibility to practice his TL); on the other hand, the researcher has to listen to the interviewee actively and make sure to understand the answers properly. If the interviewer masters the L1 of the interviewee or another language in which the interviewee is more proficient, he should switch to it trying not to hurt the sensitivity of the participant. In this way the researcher will be able to obtain more reliable and accurate information during the interview.
- If the researcher does not speak the participant's L1 and if the participant has a low proficiency of the other languages spoken by the researcher, the researcher has to speak slowly, repeat concepts, simplify sentences and words and adopt the language teacher. The researcher has to use repetitions and confirmation checks frequently, without showing that the proficiency level of the participant is low. The researcher should encourage the participants to proceed but he has to avoid finding words for them until they finish the sentence because this could influence the answers.

Final observations

- Independently of the language, everyone has a different level of literacy and cultural background. The first minutes of the interview are crucial to understand the

social and cultural background of the person the researcher is talking with and to adapt the register of conversation accordingly. Intuition helps at the beginning. The questions of the script have to be formulated in different registers and the researcher has to improvise. The researcher has to make the participants feel at ease and, in some cases, the adoption of very simple words help participants.

- The researcher has to adapt to the different personalities of the participants. If a participant has a nervous temper, the researcher will speak calmly; if the participant is introvert, the researcher has to be sociable and ask more probing sub-questions.
- The researcher has to show that he fully understands the participants' point of view even though his views totally differ.
- The researcher has to be always available and answer all the questions and doubts his participants might have anytime, before, during and after the interview phase.