

An analysis of social network websites for language learning: Implications for teaching and learning English as a Second Language

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Abstract

Although educators are excited about the potential of social network sites for language learning (SNSLL), there is a lack of understanding of how SNSLL can be used to facilitate teaching and learning for English as Second language (ESL) instructors and students. The purpose of this study was to examine the affordances of four selected SNSLL (LingQ, Lang-8, italki, and Polyglotclub) through site design and user experience from two perspectives: using the sites as a language teacher through site analyses; and using the sites as a language learner through usability testing. The findings showed that these sites have the potential to facilitate language learning. The learning tasks created using the social networking features of these sites are to provide examples of how to use these SNSLL as teaching tools under a socio-constructivist learning framework. In addition, the results of the usability testing highlighted the importance of considering the website's information, interface, and interaction designs. SNSLL should be as easy to use and as intuitive to navigate as possible. We hope the findings will provide valuable insights regarding how SNSLL can be used as teaching and learning tools, and how they should be designed to facilitate pedagogical goals.

KEYWORDS: LANGUAGE LEARNING; SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION; SITE ANALYSIS;
SOCIAL NETWORKING; USABILITY TESTING; WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGY

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Introduction

Web 2.0 affords numerous advantages for second language acquisition (SLA), especially in terms of fostering increased learner autonomy and promoting interaction and collaboration. As a Web 2.0 application, social network sites for language learning (SNSLL) hold potential for SLA. Unlike generic social network sites, such as *Facebook* or *Twitter*, SNSLL are language learning sites that have social networking characteristics. Although educators are excited about their affordances, there is a lack of understanding of how SNSLL can be used to facilitate teaching and learning for English as Second language (ESL) instructors and students (Clark and Gruba, 2010; Liu *et al.*, 2013; Zourou, 2012). Although there is research looking into how generic social network sites can be used in SLA classrooms (Arnold and Paulus, 2010; Blattner and Fiori, 2011; Mills, 2011; Prichard, 2013), much research is needed to inform ESL instructors how to take advantage of SNSLL in their teaching practice (Brick, 2011, 2012; Clark and Gruba, 2010; Lomicka and Lord, 2009; Orsini-Jones *et al.*, 2013). The purpose of this study, therefore, was to conduct a detailed analysis of four selected SNSLL from the perspectives of ESL teachers and learners. We hope the findings will provide valuable insights regarding how SNSLL can be used as teaching and learning tools, and how they should be designed to facilitate pedagogical goals.

Theoretical framework

To understand pedagogical values and affordances of SNSLL, this study examined four selected SNSLL from instructors' perspectives by performing detailed site analyses and from learners' perspectives by conducting usability testing. This research is informed by the literature in three areas as presented below: Socio-constructivist approaches to language learning, Web 2.0-based social networking technology, and usability testing.

Socio-constructivist approaches to language learning

Social constructivists view learning not just as an individual process, but an ongoing process of knowledge construction and reflective thinking within a social environment (Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Under this framework, learning is participatory, knowledge is social, and language develops via shared and meaningful activities, through performance within a community of practice (Bronack *et al.*, 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991), and when learners connect with appropriate knowledge from a sociocultural context in which they are immersed (Bonk and Cunningham, 1998).

Social constructivist approaches to language learning and teaching encourage the integration of different language skills (reading, writing, listening

and speaking) as well as the negotiation of cognitive and social processes through social interaction (Harrison and Thomas, 2009). Within their shared space, learners have the opportunity to offer personal insights, obtain alternative perspectives, and test hypotheses and ideas (Bonk and Cunningham, 1998; Duffy and Cunningham, 1996). The teacher performs a facilitative role through expert guidance and the provision of opportunities for learners to practice and learn knowledge and skills in a supportive and encouraging environment.

Second language (L2) researchers operating under a social constructivist framework often explore how L2 learners engage in meaning making and knowledge construction, and how this co-construction process results in linguistic modifications among and within individual learners during collaborative activities (Duffy and Cunningham, 1996). Both to understand how learning occurs and to enhance the learning process, L2 researchers also investigate the affordances of technology as mediating tools to facilitate collaboration. With the availability of Web 2.0 tools, it is important to examine their affordances to facilitate language teaching and learning.

Web 2.0 and social networking for language learning

Web 2.0 technology is characterized as social, personalized, interactive, and participatory (Anderson, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005). It is considered to have numerous advantages for SLA, especially in terms of fostering increased learner autonomy and promoting interaction and collaboration (De Weber *et al.*, 2007; Solomon and Schrum, 2007). Autonomy and collaboration address the very core of Web 2.0 websites where users come together to 'collaborate, learn, and build knowledge' (McLoughlin and Lee, 2007: 664). This collaborative nature of learning is based upon an 'architecture of participation' that enables users to generate content in a public space, such as on a social network website (Barsky and Purdon, 2006: 65).

Social networks (SN) or the use of SN sites (SNSs) to facilitate social relationships between members provide opportunities for user-generated language learning resources and 'many-to-many' forms of publication (Conole and Alevizou, 2010; Harrison and Thomas, 2009). These learning opportunities have the potential to promote second language acquisition not only for individual users, but also for online learning communities. Through the affordances of SNS features, users can support each other, interact with one another, and socially construct meaning together (Kelm, 2011). Duffy (2011) identified five common features of SNSs: 'A user can (a) create a profile, (b) find peers online, (c) publicly erect or confirm peer connections, (d) collaborate to share content, and (e) form online communities' (p. 286). Furthermore, SNSs 'allow individuals to (a) construct a public or semi-public profile

within a bounded system, (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (c) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system' (boyd and Ellison, 2007: 211). In 2011, boyd further noted that SNSs increase peripheral awareness through status updates, where users share daily activities with friends in the network, as well as statistical information regarding site activities, which appear on users' profiles. In these networked social spaces, users with different interests are encouraged to improve their individual abilities and to 'contribute to distributed knowledge' from which everyone in the community can benefit (Gee, 2004, p. 79).

Research on social networking features for language learning purpose examined both generic SNSs and SNSLL. For example, recent research of generic SNSs for SLA has focused on the development of particular language skills and learner training. Blattner and Fiori (2011) demonstrated how *Facebook* groups could be useful for providing access to authentic language input. Participants completed observation-based tasks to promote learner awareness of L2 socio-pragmatic norms, as evidenced in written and in-class verbal reports. Prichard (2013) examined the effectiveness of training L2 learners how to use *Facebook* safely and effectively for language learning purposes. Training focused on site features such as privacy settings and participant sensitivity to socially and culturally appropriate content.

Research on SNSLL has focused on such topics as site designs using usability testing (Stevenson and Liu, 2010; Razaee, 2010), L2 identity formation (Harrison and Thomas, 2009), and user perspectives (Brick, 2011; Orsini-Jones *et al.*, 2013). Although boyd and Ellison (2007) observed that SNSs were primarily used to support existing social networks, Harrison and Thomas (2009) reported that the success of SNSLL depended upon users' willingness to form new social networks. In a study by Brick (2011), language learners were pleased by the unique opportunities provided by SNSLL sites to practice their oral skills with native speakers and to receive almost immediate peer-feedback, but they also criticized the available learning materials. Researchers also warned that instructors incorporating open systems such as SNSLL in their language classrooms needed to be aware of the possibility of inappropriate advances and cyber-flirting from other site users (Brick, 2011; Orsini-Jones *et al.*, 2013). The participants in Orsini-Jones *et al.* (2013) reported concern regarding language variety and the reliability of user corrections. However, much research is needed in terms of insights for instructors interested in using SNSLL in L2 classrooms and the facilitative effects of site design for learning.

Usability testing

Usability testing refers to the research methodology that consists of observing website users while they perform a task in order to evaluate the website's design - i.e., how the site helps, confuses, or defeats its users - and then use this information to improve the site's ease of use (Nielsen, 2012a). According to Nielsen (2012a), general usability testing comprises five main components: learnability, efficiency, memorability, errors, and satisfaction. Although general usability testing can be useful for informing design principles and building effective and attractive websites (Preece *et al.*, 2011), usability testing involving educational websites, such as e-learning sites, needs to consider additional pedagogical factors, such as keeping content fresh in learners' minds and achieving efficiency that leads to positive learning outcomes (Lim and Lee, 2007). As defined by Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2004), pedagogical usability stands for 'usability as this affects educational website design and development, particularly in the context of supported open and distance learning' (p. 1). Nokelainen (2006) identified 10 pedagogical usability criteria: learner control, learner activity, cooperative/collaborative learning, goal orientation, applicability, added value, motivation, valuation of previous knowledge, flexibility, and feedback; and confirmed their importance in his empirical study exploring elementary school students' opinions via a survey. A pedagogical usability testing can therefore help provide valuable information regarding how learners use and view SNSLL. While usability testing can provide valuable insights to site design, very little usability testing has been done on second language websites, and SNSLL in particular, apart from few previous research (Liu *et al.*, 2008, 2010; Razaeei, 2010). To understand how SNSLL can be used as a learning tool, we conducted usability testing with ESL students.

This study builds upon our previous research (Liu *et al.*, 2013) examining how 21 ESL college students from 11 countries used three popular SNSLL (*Busuu*, *Livemocha*, and *English Café*) and what they thought of them. The findings revealed some benefits and challenges associated with the use of SNSLL for extending learning beyond classrooms into online language learning communities. Benefits included enabling users to connect to others via multimedia (text, audio, video) and facilitating learner reciprocal feedback and collaboration in a digital social space so that users with different abilities and skills can serve as the knowledgeable other. An identified challenge, however, was that the design of a site can influence users' perception, and this finding highlighted the importance of site design. Given the findings, this study continues this research line to further examine the affordances of four selected SNSLL through site design and user experience from two perspectives: Using the sites as a language teacher through site analyses, and using the sites as a language learner through usability testing.

This study addressed the following research questions (Rqs):

1. From the perspective of ESL teachers, what social networking features in social network sites for language learning (SNSLL) can facilitate English language teaching?
2. How can ESL teachers utilize SNSLL features to enhance language learning practice opportunities for ESL learners?
3. From the perspective of ESL learners, what social networking features in SNSLL can facilitate English language learning?

Method

Selection procedure of four SNSLL

The SNSLL selection process involved four main steps. First, we searched for possible SNSLL, intentionally excluding websites examined in previous studies (e.g., *Busuu*, *Livemocha*, and *English Café* in Liu *et al.*, 2013, and *Palabea*, *Livemocha*, and *Babbel* in Stevenson and Liu, 2010; *Busuu* in Brick, 2012; *Livemocha*, *Babbel*, and *Busuu* in Loiseau, 2011) because they were already part of previous research. Second, from a set of 18 possible SNSLL, we evaluated to determine which sites afforded learners the eight social network features identified in boyd and Ellison (2007), boyd (2011), and Duffy (2011): (a) Create a profile; (b) add friends; (c) search for new friends; (d) create a circle of friends; (e) communicate with others in the network via multiple means; (f) receive feedback from friends in the network; (g) upload user-generated content; and (h) enhance peripheral awareness. We decided to exclude 10 sites from further analysis because they did not afford all eight features, had few or no free materials, had no or limited network possibilities, or had too many advertisements. Third, after each research team member individually interacted with and examined the remaining set (*English, Baby!*; *italki*; *Lang-8*; *LingQ*; *Memrise*; *Mixxer*; *Polyglotclub*; and *Tongueout*), we decided not to use *English, Baby!* because it had recently shifted to all paid service, or *Memrise* because it has categories other than foreign language learning. Finally, to make the usability testing more manageable, among the remaining six SNSLL, we voted to select the top four sites (i.e., *italki*, *Lang-8*, *LingQ*, and *Polyglotclub*) that have most SN features for further analysis. What follows is a synopsis of each chosen site's basic features at the time of the site analysis and usability testing. These four SNSLL sites offer language learning features that users can access for free once they register for membership. After registration, members of these sites can create/edit profiles and follow other users. Figure 1 shows the homepages.



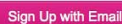
1a. LingQ: <http://www.lingq.com/>



1b. Lang-8: <http://lang-8.com/>

Become Fluent in Any Language

Find an online teacher for personal language lessons


Learn Really Fast

With a 1-on-1 teacher, you get personal attention and customized lessons to get you speaking from day one.



Convenient

Learn with a teacher from the comfort of your home. No need to travel to class or study abroad to be immersed in a language.



Affordable

With hundreds of teachers to choose from, you can find a teacher that fits your learning style and budget.

1c. *italki*: <http://www.italki.com/>



1d. *Polyglotclub*: <http://polyglotclub.com/>

Figure 1. Screenshots of the homepages of the four SNSLL.

Site descriptions

***Italki*.** *Italki* members can create/join groups, write notebook entries, and ask/answer questions. When users write L1 entries, other users may correct their mistakes and/or make comments. Also, users can ask language questions in their L1, or in any other language. Group discussions vary from general cultural topics to language-specific topics to politics. Additionally, *italki* offers language lessons with professional tutors, but users must purchase *italki*'s currency (ITC) to take advantage of this service.

Lang-8. *Lang-8* focuses on practicing writing. Once registered, members can write journal entries, comment on or correct other users' journal entries, and create/join groups. Group exchanges range from a discussion of cultural topics to language-specific exchanges to social networking communications. For a fee, members can access more convenient functions, such as PDF downloading of corrected journals, a priority option on journal lists, and additional languages to learn.

LingQ. The main source of learning contents for the 11 languages currently offered at *LingQ* comes from members' submissions, which are limited to five per account. Contents range from basic words and simple dialogues to more elaborated tasks for speaking and writing, such as writing diaries. Members can create personalized LingQs, or vocabulary glosses, for each lesson, which allows the site to differentiate between new and known words in future lessons. For a fee, members can access additional functions, such as unlimited import lessons, premium iPhone app, import/export vocabulary lists, tutors that can provide corrective feedback, and ad-free contents.

Polyglotclub. *Polyglotclub* offers all its services for free. Members can write posts for others to correct, correct and evaluate others' posts, create/join events, ask/answer questions, participate in forums, post/browse videos, and join chat rooms. Additionally, users can get involved in offline language exchange activities through *Polyglotclub's* menu features. For example, if a user lives in Paris, the user can create, search, and/or join language/culture events that are held in Paris. Further, a user can explicitly accept homestay.

Participants

To examine the SN features of the four SNSLL from an instructor's perspective, the opinions of six teachers who had an average of over five years (ranging from half year to 13 years) of teaching experience in ESL, EFL, or other foreign language contexts were considered. Although these teachers were also members of the research team, they were qualified to perform the tasks because they both had extensive ESL/EFL teaching experience and a good knowledge of SNSLL, as some were part of the previous SNSLL study (Liu *et al.*, 2013), or are using SNSLL and other Web 2.0 technologies in their own language teaching.

Six ESL participants (two females and four males, aged 21–30) were recruited from ESL courses at a large research university in the southwestern part of the US to participate in usability testing. They were from four countries (Italy, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, and Turkey) and at a high intermediate-to-advanced level of English. Their answers to the demographic questionnaire indicated that their computer and Internet surfing experiences were sufficient

to perform a usability testing of SNSLL. All claimed using computers and surfing the Internet for various purposes on a daily basis; five reported using the Internet and four having used SNSLL to learn foreign languages including English; and all appeared to be knowledgeable about the general social networking concept.

Data analysis

To answer the first two research questions, we first proceeded to compare the selected sites' SN features that could be used to facilitate language learning using the SN features discussed above. Each site was examined to determine if and how they incorporated each of the eight SN features. This analysis was entered in a spreadsheet. One team member was in charge of a site and her analysis was verified and refined by another member. As a team, we reviewed and discussed any discrepancies until we reached an agreement of the analysis. Then, we examined these SN features from an instructor's perspective, asking ourselves 'What can language instructors do with these sites?' This analysis generated possible language learning tasks using the content and features available from these four SNSLL based upon the previous analysis. To ensure the validity and reliability of the analyses, the task descriptions were first generated by one member and then reviewed and refined by the other team members. The research team met weekly during the study duration of about one year to discuss the analyses and perform member-checking and peer-debriefing. Any disagreement was resolved by involving other team members.

To answer the third research question, we then conducted the usability testing. Each of these six participants tested two sites with one hour allocated for each site. Each SNSLL was tested by two participants, randomly assigned, with a total of 12 individual testing sessions. We counter-balanced the site testing order to minimize any bias that could possibly be introduced through site testing sequence. Additionally, we took measures to ensure that the participants were not familiar with the sites we asked them to test. Construction of the usability testing instruments closely followed Nielsen's methodology (Nielsen *et al.*, 2000), previous research on usability testing (Krug, 2005; Mayhew, 1999; Preece *et al.*, 2011; Rubin, 2008) and our previous usability research (Liu *et al.*, 2008; Stevenson and Liu, 2010). An exploratory task, a specific task, and an open-ended task were constructed for each site: while an exploratory task aims for a user to explore and get familiar with the site, a specific task aims for a user to perform a task using specific features of the site, and an open-ended task directs a user to a section of a site to perform a task, but does not provide specific instruction as to how to get to the section (Liu *et al.*, 2008; Stevenson and Liu, 2010; Nielsen

et al., 2000). The exploratory task was the same for all four sites, but the specific and open-ended tasks were site specific (see Appendix A for an example). Demographic information (e.g., age, gender, level of computer and web experience) and previous use of general SNSs (e.g., *Facebook* and *Twitter*) was collected via a questionnaire. Each participant was closely observed by two researchers while performing for each SNSLL assigned tasks with a laptop. One researcher took notes and captured screenshots when the participant seemed to have difficulty in performing a task; the other moderated the testing session and asked think-aloud elicitation questions, such as ‘I saw or noticed you ... Can you tell me why?’, when necessary. Finally, after completing all assigned tasks, the participants were asked to complete a site feedback questionnaire consisting of items eliciting their overall satisfaction with using the sites, their opinions regarding using SN features to facilitate language learning, and their feedback on each SNSLL (Liu *et al.*, 2008; Stevenson and Liu, 2010; Nielsen *et al.*, 2000; Rubin, 2008) in terms of: (a) Ease of finding the information/activities (information design); (b) quality of the information/activities (interaction design); (c) appearance (interface design); and (d) future use. Some questions used 5-point Likert scales with 1 being negative and 5 being positive, while others were open-ended (see Appendix B). Responses to the Likert scale questions were analyzed descriptively. Open-ended and think-aloud responses were analyzed using an iterative examination of the data (Charmaz, 2006) and used to supplement the survey data. Three researchers were involved in the process of analyzing the qualitative data as well as checking and verifying the descriptive data in the Likert scale questions until 100% inter-rater reliability was reached on the interpretations.

Findings

Analyzing SN features in *italki*, *Lang-8*, *LingQ*, and *Polyglotclub*: teachers’ perspective

To answer RQ1, the analysis of the eight SN features in each site is presented below.

Feature 1: Creating a profile. Most SNSs require users to create a profile when they first access the site. In creating a profile, users provide basic demographic and language-related information. Thus, this feature enables users to choose how they want to present themselves and their identities to other users. Our analysis revealed that requirements and options for creating a profile vary in these four SNSLL. A detailed analysis of required and optional information needed by each of the four SN websites is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Creating a profile in the four SNSLL

Creating a profile features	<i>italki</i>	<i>Lang-8</i>	<i>LingQ</i>	<i>Polyglotclub</i>
Creating a user ID				
Creating a nickname	Req.	Req.		Req.
Providing user's full name			Req.	
Language				
Native language	Req.	Req.	Req.	Req.
Language of study	Opt.	Req.		Req.
Dictionary and site interface language			Req.	
Contact info				
Email address	Req		Req	Req
Contact address	MSN, YahooID, AIM, gChat, ICQ.	Skype Twitter	Skype	MSN, YahooID, AIM, gChat, ICQ.
Geographical locations				
Nation/region		Opt.		
Country and time zone			Req.	
Country of origin	Req.			
Current city	Req.			Opt.
Self-written introduction	Opt.	Opt.	Opt.	Opt.
Profile picture	Opt.	Opt.	Opt.	Opt.
Language proficiency	Opt.			Opt.

Note. Req. stands for 'required', and Opt. stands for 'optional'.

Feature 2: Searching for friends. All four SNSLL allow users to search for potential language partners that could help them improve their L2 skills. However, *Polyglotclub* is the only site that uses SN terminology, as users can *search for friends* from its homepage. *Italki* and *LingQ* prompt users to *search for members* from their homepage. In addition to filters specific to site features, these sites offer advanced search filters for searching for friends. Information pertaining to search filters in each website is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Detailed analysis of 'searching for friends/partners filters' for Each SNSLL

Searching for friends features	<i>italki</i>	<i>Lang-8</i>	<i>LingQ</i>	<i>Polyglotclub</i>
Choosing language partner based on:				
Gender	✓	✓		✓
Member roles (tutor, writing corrector, conversation host)			✓	
Sorting users based on:				
Last login	✓	✓		
Most active (does correction and/or have conversations)			✓	
Most popular and/or newest member	✓			
Registration		✓		✓
VIP membership, number of visitors, and/or profile update				✓

Feature 3: Adding friends. All four sites enable users to increase their potential language partners by inviting familiar online friends and/or adding site users to their network. However, only *LingQ* allows users to import their external email information and invite selected contacts. The other sites require users to type, or copy and paste individual email addresses into the invitation. Adding friends is relatively simple on *italki* and *LingQ*. Like *Twitter* users, *italki* and *LingQ* users can click *Follow* or *Unfollow* (sic) to start or stop receiving other users' updates. However, to become friends, users must mutually follow each other. Like *Facebook* users, *Lang-8* and *Polyglotclub* users can send friend requests. An introductory message is optional in the former, but required in the latter, making *Polyglotclub* the most cumbersome of the sites analyzed with regard to this SN feature.

Feature 4: Creating a circle of friends. The four SNSLL also allow users to create a circle of friends, thereby enabling them to establish membership in the online community and demonstrate online social presence. In addition to maintaining friend networks, users can join interest circles via discussion forums, begin new discussion topics, comment on discussions, and/or rate other users' comments (see Table 3 for detailed information regarding these features).

Table 3. Detailed analysis of the features for 'creating a circle of friends' in Each SNSLL.

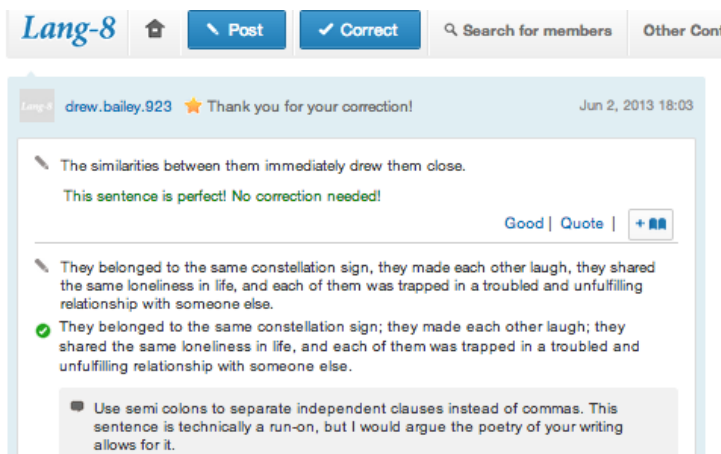
Features	<i>italki</i>	<i>Lang-8</i>	<i>LingQ</i>	<i>Polyglotclub</i>
Join interest circles	✓	✓	✓	✓
Begin new discussions	✓	✓		✓
Comment on discussions	✓	✓		✓
Rate comments				
Using thumb up/down	✓			✓
Giving rose			✓	
Sort discussions based on				
Language composition	✓			✓
Delete forum threads	✓		✓	

In addition, *Italki* offers further opportunities for social networking because it allows users to share discussions on other online SNSs, such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. In contrast, *Lang-8* discussions are nested within groups, giving the group moderator the option to set security measures that would require approval to join. As a result, *Lang-8* has a stricter forum commenting policy than *italki*, *LingQ*, and *Polyglotclub*. While non-group members can view comments, only *Lang-8* group members are allowed to post comments.¹

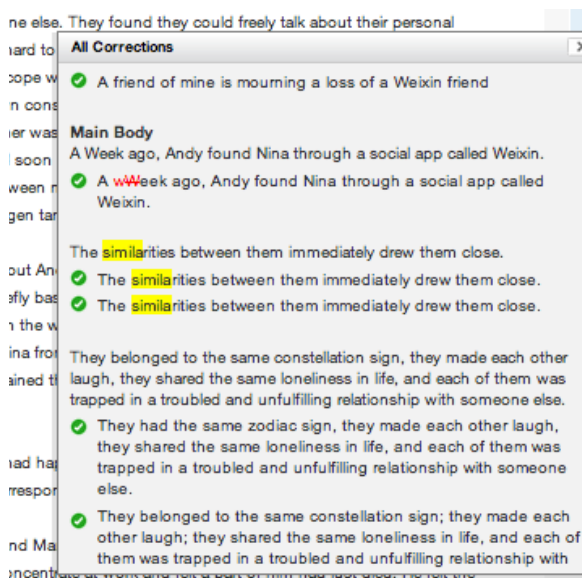
Feature 5: Communicating with others in a network via multiple means. All four SNSLL afford their users multiple means of communication with other site users, including private and public messages and chats. *Italki*, *Lang-8*, and *Polyglotclub* host internal messaging systems. Users can send private messages directly to other users, and access past messages through their inboxes. In contrast, *LingQ* users can post private messages to other users' walls and then isolate their past messages using the wall filter option for messages. *LingQ* allows any user to post public messages on another user's profile page, but *Lang-8* users can only post on their friends' profile pages, giving users greater control over their online presentation. *Italki* and *Polyglotclub* do not offer commenting features on individual user profiles. Although neither *Lang-8* nor *LingQ* offer chatting functions, *italki* and *Polyglotclub* have group and person-to-person text-only chatting options.

Feature 6: Receiving feedback from friends in a network. *Italki*, *Lang-8*, and *Polyglotclub* allow users to respond to one another with comments or corrective feedback, whereas only paid tutors on *LingQ* can provide corrective feedback to users' written entries. The corrections feature, which enables tandem learning, is linked from the main toolbars in *Lang-8* and *Polyglotclub*, indicating a central role for user-generated feedback on these two sites. Both *Lang-8* and *Polyglotclub* divide written submissions at the phrasal level for feedback, and allow the user giving corrections to color-code deletions and

additions. *Lang-8* feedback can be presented according to the feedback giver (Figure 2a) or aggregated at the phrasal level (Figure 2b). Written responses are sorted by user on *italki* (Figure 2c) and by phrase on *Polyglotclub* (Figure 2d). *Italki* feedback is embedded in a copy of the original text, but learners may find that the phrase-based organization on *Lang-8* and *Polyglotclub* simplifies the critical comparison of multiple responses.



2a. *Lang-8* feedback by user.



2b. *Lang-8* feedback by phrase.

As for my **other** interests, I like to participate in events, **cultural or otherwise to meet** where people **from all parts of the world**. I am **fascinated** with different **cultures meet**, and to get to know, **cultural backgrounds and to understand the way they are**. **other culture and exchange knowledge**, also I **also like to reading** poetry and novels. **Have** Participating in scientific contests and events whenever the chance allows **is something I always look for**. **Never know what serendipity one can find there**.

[University] is a place **where** I find and feel comfortable to study at; not because of its excellent facilities and faculty, but its vibrant and varied student population. I believe that it is the people who make the world and **not** the other way around.

Once you are satisfied, repost and we can polish it further. :)

0 | | Jeff | Nov 07, 2012 | 0 comments - Add a comment | Flag

2c. *italki* feedback by user.

Sentence 1

Everyone has their own idea of the perfect home.

ADD a NEW CORRECTION! - Sentence 1

Sentence 2

I dream of a house by the sea, so that it can be more pleasant?

Redstump Vote now!

MikD Vote now!

Canadianabroad Vote now!

ADD a NEW CORRECTION! - Sentence 2

2d. *Polyglotclub* feedback by phrase.

Figure 2. Screenshots of SN features.

Users of *italki*, *Lang-8*, and *Polyglotclub* are also encouraged to evaluate the content of other users' corrective feedback. *Italki* and *Polyglotclub* users can evaluate with a thumb up or down; *Lang-8* users can select good or ungood (sic) and the original poster can give a star to helpful feedback received from other users. *Italki* and *Lang-8* allow users to respond directly to corrective feedback. *Lang-8* and *Polyglotclub* allow users to save corrections to personal online notebooks, and *italki* and *Polyglotclub* users can flag inappropriate responses. Additionally, these sites provide a link to the profile of the feedback giver.

Feature 7: Uploading user-generated content. *Lang-8* users can upload written production and photos for responses from other users, add topic tags that link their writing to other entries in the network, and publish *Lang-8* posts on *Twitter*. Although *Lang-8* does not host videos, users can post a link to a video or another site for comments. *Polyglotclub* users can upload user-created videos with language or culture learning content, leave comments on videos, and send messages to users who uploaded videos. *LingQ* users are equipped with a customizable activity feed on their profile pages that allows them to embed or upload external media, such as videos, audio-files, links, and images, quickly and in a variety of ways, and control what content is shown by selecting the filters on the left. As previously mentioned, *LingQ* users can import five user-created lessons, such as L1 written and oral texts, for other users to create *LingQs* and expand their vocabulary. *Italki* has relatively fewer options than the other sites in terms of user-generated content: It allows users to upload written entries in their notebooks for feedback.

Feature 8: Enhancing peripheral awareness. All four SNSLL allow users to update their peers on daily activities and site-related accomplishments, which contributes to enhance peripheral awareness of user activity. User profiles on *italki*, *Lang-8*, and *LingQ* resemble those on *Facebook* and other popular SNSs. In addition to listing a summary of items, such as known words and number of reading hours, *LingQ* user profiles include progress snapshots or an avatar that grows from an egg to an adult as a metaphor for language development. Instead of denoting learning progress, *Lang-8* user profiles display site activity: the number of entries written, entries corrected, corrections received, and friends. *Italki* only tracks the user's number of entries and comments made in discussion forums, answer forums, and notebook. *Polyglotclub* user profiles include a photo or avatar and a numerical summary of online activity, such as corrections, photos, and friends, but it does not include examples of recent site activities. *Lang-8* homepage resembles that of *Facebook*, with a *news feed* feature that alerts users to their friends' latest journal entries and, in the spirit of tandem language learning, indicates other users' entries that

need to be corrected. Homepages on *italki*, *LingQ*, and *Polyglotclub* also alert users to recent entries awaiting correction, but they do not provide a link to their friends' recent activities.

Exploring how ESL teachers can utilize SN features for language learning

To answer RQ2, we created several sample language learning tasks that ESL teachers could use as teaching tools. A detailed description of four tasks is provided below. A complete list of tasks for each SNSLL is included in Appendix C. In keeping with social-constructivist learning approaches, these tasks intend to engage learners in online collaboration and knowledge co-construction with peers using technology tools within authentic communities (both online and in their classrooms). The tasks also include concrete individual components such as journal entries, quizzes, oral presentation that require language learners to display the knowledge they have internalized during their collaboration and collective knowledge-building experiences.

Task 1: Keeping a regular (weekly, biweekly) journal. Students can ask *Italki*, *Lang-8*, and *Polyglotclub* users (including native speakers) to provide them with corrective feedback and comments on their weekly/biweekly journal writing. These online interactions with knowledgeable others are likely to enhance their opportunities to develop their L2 writing skills. Afterwards, students can submit a portfolio of their best entries (Williams, 2012), or the instructor can have each student select one entry and publish a class collection (Vanett and Jurich, 1990). As the literature suggests that journal writing should be expressive and creative rather than focused on accuracy (Casanave, 1994, 2011; Lucas and Jurich, 1990), we recommend assigning a grade based on completion/participation and encouraging students to comment on the content of the journal entries.

Task 2: Watching online videos. Videos can act as linguistic resources for accents, vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and other discourses (Sherman, 2003). Individually or in groups, students can watch a video from *Polyglotclub* and focus on identifying unknown vocabulary, such as common expressions related to money, or grammatical forms, such as the present perfect tense. Afterwards, in groups students can teach the new expressions or forms to their classmates, and then test their classmates' new knowledge through a quiz that they could complete in pairs or in small groups. This task can help students improve their listening skills, enhance and facilitate their collaborative vocabulary and grammatical learning, and foster the development of their presentation and oral skills. Individual vocabulary and/or grammar acquisition can later be assessed through a teacher-designed vocabulary or grammar quiz.

Task 3: Reconstructing texts and creating LingQs. In *LingQ*, students can go to *Learn>Library* and choose the level of listening materials and a course topic that might interest them, and listen to the audio recording of the lesson. Then, they can work in groups or pairs to reconstruct the text (i.e., do a dictogloss). To encourage cooperation and friendly competition, the teacher could declare winner the group or pair who most closely reproduced the text. Once students finish this collaborative activity, they can compare their reconstructed text to the listening/reading text and create their own LingQs with the words they misspelled, misused, or missed. Students' final products can be graded based on their participation and their willingness to cooperate, which is likely to increase their investment and motivation. This activity can also help students consolidate new vocabulary knowledge and improve their listening skills, pronunciation, and spelling.

Task 4: Sharing culture-rich files and photographs. Learning the target language means also learning about the target culture (Schulz, 2007). Images can be used as springboards for description, analysis, discussion, and/or reflection of the cultural phenomena they depict (Barnes-Karol and Broner, 2010). In *Lang-8*, students can go to *Write* and post five photos and a description of a holiday in their country. Next they can look for entries related to cultural aspects of a holiday celebrated by speakers of their target language and write comments in response to those entries. Finally, students can write a report or make classroom presentations comparing celebrations in both cultures. Written or oral reports can be graded based on students' ability to compare, contrast and synthesize the information, their ability to present the information, and their participation. This task enables students to familiarize themselves with the culture of the target community and become aware of cultural differences. Therefore, this task can maximize students' opportunities to develop their intercultural competence and sensitivity.

Examining SN features for Language Learning: ESL Learners' Perspectives

The findings of usability testing are presented below to address RQ3.

General usability issues

Several usability issues regarding the SNSLL designs were observed during the testing such as an awkward registration process, distracting advertisements, complicated navigations, inaccurate translation, and technical errors.

Registration and advertisement

Participants experienced some confusion during the registration process for *italki*. It was not only a long, multiple-step process that required users to

confirm their E-mail, upload a photo, write a profile, and choose services between ‘Language Community’ (free) and ‘Personal Teacher’ (paid), but it also included an advertisement for *italki*’s paid function that confused its users. During the testing with *italki*, the participant had to go through a screen full of advertisements about learning with online teachers even after selecting *Language Community*, the free option (see Figure 3). Since the layout of this screen (e.g., breadcrumb-like navigation) did not look like advertisements but the option the participant had selected and would have to proceed, it made the participant confused; she could not continue the registration task without the help of the moderator.²

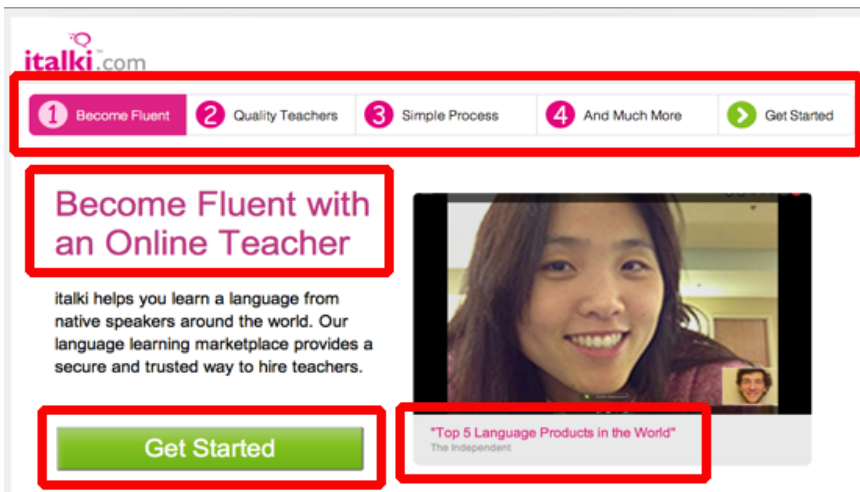
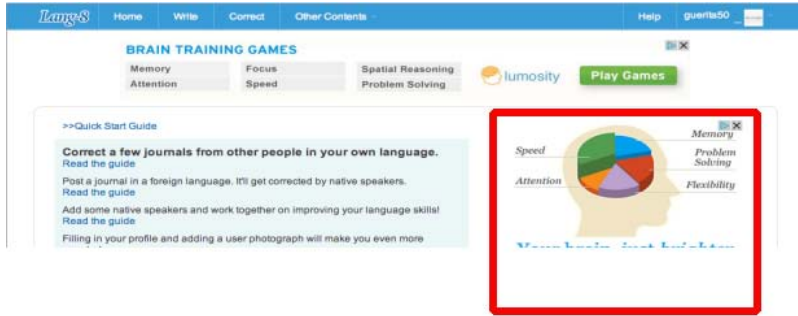


Figure 3. An advertisement for *italki*’s paid function.

The large number of advertisements on *italki*, *Lang-8*, and *LingQ* seemed to distract participants. For example, there was an instance when an eye-catching picture on *Lang-8*’s dashboard drew a participant to click and start to browse another website without realizing he had left *Lang-8* (see Figure 4a). While the design of the advertisement was colorful, the content did not stand out as a comparison (see Figure 4b). Undeniably, websites need to have advertisements to generate revenue. However, the focus of the design for learning websites should be on the content and not on the advertisement. Making advertisements smaller and placing them in less prominent places on the screen could make content more prominent.



4a. Advertisement on *Lang-8*: confusing as there is no frame and the banner is white.

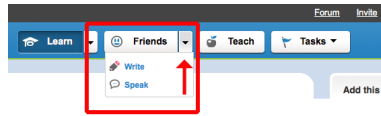


4b. Advertisements on *Lang-8*: too colorful, whereas the content does not stand out compared to the ads.

Figure 4. Screenshots of advertisements.

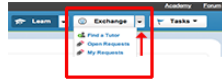
Navigation and translation

Inconsistencies related to a website’s navigation design can also cause confusion. For example, *LingQ* had two main navigation items – *Friends* and *Tasks* – side by side; yet users were expected to follow two different navigation patterns: *Friends* was clickable and *Tasks* was not. Users needed to click *Friends* to add/find users and browse other users’ profiles. However, the two clickable submenus under *Friends* – *Write* and *Speak* – were not related to finding friends. Since one could not find friends by clicking *Friends*’ submenus, the participants who tested *LingQ* had some difficulty completing the task, except for one participant who identified himself as an advanced-level computer user and figured out he could click the *Friends* button. *LingQ* distinguishes a clickable main menu item from a non-clickable main menu item by having a blue separating line between the menu item and the drop-down button (compare *Friends* and *Tasks* buttons in Figure 5a, which both have a down-arrow but one is clickable while the other is not). Using a separator line to distinguish the functionality difference between two navigation patterns (*Friends* and *Tasks* in this case) is not a common website design technique and can only cause confusion as in this case.³ Navigation in websites should be intuitive and obvious to users.



Blue line to separate the menu and the drop-down arrow

5a. The *Friends* button separated from a drop-down menu.



Blue line to separate the menu and the drop-down arrow

5b. The updated button *Exchange* with a drop-down menu.

Figure 5. Navigation bar of *LingQ*.

Inaccurate translation of key labels was another issue observed during the testing. For example, when a Taiwanese participant tried to upload a lesson into *LingQ*, the Chinese label ‘單元’ (*unit*) did not make sense to him. He did not think that ‘單元’ (*unit*) was the place where he could upload his own lesson because the direct translation of ‘lesson’ into Chinese was ‘ke cheng’ (课程). This participant also mentioned inaccurate translations in *Polyglotclub*: the menu *Edit* (edit your profile) was translated into ‘修正’ (correct) on the left navigation bar in the Chinese interface. Chinese users may think this label indicates ‘correcting others’ journals’ rather than ‘editing profiles’ (see Figure 6). Because translations in *Polyglotclub* are all done by user volunteers who are not necessarily native speakers or professional translators, inaccuracies are likely to occur.

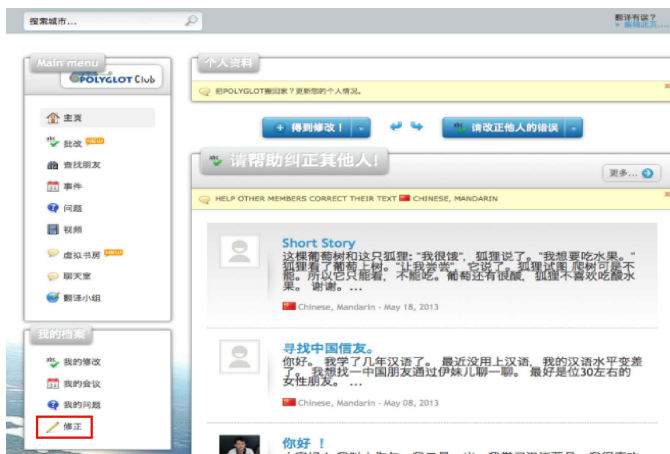


Figure 6. Chinese interface on *Polyglotclub*.

Another issue arose when one participant was searching notebook entries in Arabic using *italki* to perform a correction task. First, he selected *Arabic* in the filter, but he could not find an entry he wanted to correct because many entries already had some corrections. So he decided to narrow down the search by using another filter: *No corrections*. However, as soon as he clicked the *No corrections* tab, the language filter was set back to the default: *Chinese (Mandarin)*. So he had to filter for Arabic again before he could check a new notebook entry. When he tried to go back to the previous page with filtered results for *Arabic, no corrections* to find another entry, the filter was set back again to the default setting. He had to repeat the same filter many times until he found a notebook entry he wanted to correct, causing him frustration and a loss of valuable time.

Finally, some technical issues occurred. For example, during one testing session of *LingQ*, a screen froze, and during another a script error occurred. Technical issues could affect users' perception of the sites (Liu *et al.*, 2008).

Usability issues related to SN features

Participants identified four main SN related usability issues: expanding a user's friend circle, following vs. adding friends, getting and giving feedback, and uploading learning content.

Expanding a user's friend circle. The participants followed different criteria to expand their circle of friends. Several participants intentionally selected as their potential 'friends' users who teach English and were at the same time learning the participant's native language. One participant explicitly indicated that he wanted to become friends with somebody who was learning his native language, so that he could help the new friend while learning English from him/her. Two participants expressed that being able to filter 'city' in addition to language and country was useful. Even though these ESL learners were already in a country where English is spoken, one participant felt that opportunities to make local friends were rather limited. This feature could help her find local friends more easily. Other participants exhibited other choices for finding new friends (e.g., based on users' popularity or profile pictures), which responded to different individual preferences. Thus, the ESL learners preferred the SNSLL sites that offered a variety of selection options in addition to languages and cities.

Following vs. adding friends. Each site offers a different feature to expand user's social network. While users need to 'add friend' on *Lang-8* and *Polyglotclub*, they need to 'follow' other users on *italki* and *LingQ*. Although the participants had no problem making friends using the feature provided, one participant

commented that 'following' and 'adding' friends were different. For him, following another user would not make him feel any emotional attachment or friendship because users do not need to ask for permission to follow another user. In contrast, adding a user as a friend usually involves the recognition of the user. Furthermore, the 'adding friends' function needs to be simple to use. While *Lang-8* simply requires users to select *Add Friend* and send a message to the user, *Polyglotclub* requires users to fill out a form. All of the participants who tested *Polyglotclub* did not like *Polyglotclub's* complicated procedure.

Getting and giving feedback. The participants particularly liked the quick feedback they received. During the testing, one participant was both surprised and glad when he received feedback from a native speaker within five minutes of writing a journal entry on *italki*. He immediately asked for permission to go off task and wrote a thank-you note to the feedback giver. This supports Kelm's (2011) argument that SNS features foster support among users. Yet, despite his initial excitement, he still asked the moderator if the correction was accurate, as it looked different from what he had learned. Another participant was also very skeptical about the quality of the feedback he could receive from these sites. He said that he preferred asking his teachers to correct his English. ESL instructors and learners should keep in mind that because SNSLL enable anyone to provide feedback, ESL learners may get feedback that contradicts what they learned in formal instruction, which could potentially be confusing. Even if the feedback provider is a native speaker, the feedback may not be perceived as helpful, especially if this person has not received professional training in ESL.

Providing learning content. Two participants wondered why some SNSLL did not have any learning contents. One participant commented that he wished he could find materials related to his major and commented other non-SNSs (e.g., TED Talks) were more helpful to learn English. These ESL learners were looking for resources that would be useful for their specific purposes (mostly learning English for academic purposes). It appears that, while ESL learners may utilize shared learning contents they find in these SNSLL, these materials are often limited and not relevant to them. Additionally, two participants did not like and were confused by the shared learning contents feature on *LingQ* especially because of its complex interface and the need to go through a tutorial. Moreover, because *LingQ's* learning materials are user-generated contents, they are not available in a systematic way and often have labels that are not accurate, as noted by one participant who found materials labeled as 'advanced' that were too easy for advanced level learners. Although user-generated content is one of the paramount features of Web 2.0 enabled technology such as SNS, the quality of content is an issue to be mindful for language learners.

User perception. After performing the usability tasks, the participants completed a site feedback survey (see Appendix B) on their perception of the information, interaction, and interface designs of the four SNSLL, using a five-point Likert scale with 1 being negative and 5 being positive. The results showed that *Lang-8* received the highest average score (i.e., 3 Is [information, interface, interaction] average = 4.07, perceived usefulness = 2.34, worth visiting again = 4.34), followed by *italki*, *Polyglotclub*, and *LingQ* (see Table 4).

Table 4. User perception of information design, interaction design, and interface design of the sites

General Usability Aspect ^a (1 being negative and 5 being positive)	<i>Lang-8</i>	<i>italki</i>	<i>Polyglotclub</i>	<i>LingQ</i>
<i>Information, Interface & Interaction Designs (3 Is)</i>				
Ease of finding the information/activities	4	3	3.33	2.67
Quality of information/activities	4.33	3.67	3	2.67
Ease of reading the text	4.33	4.33	3	3
Appearance of site, including colors and graphics	4	3.67	2.67	2.33
Speed of pages displaying	4.67	2.67	4	2.33
Fun, entertainment value	3.67	3.33	2.33	2.33
Overall learning experience	4.33	3.33	2.67	2.33
Ease of understanding the instruction for activities on the site	4	3.33	2.67	2.33
Ease of moving around the site without getting lost	3.3	3.67	3	2.33
3 Is average ^b	4.07	3.44	2.96	2.48
Perceived Usefulness ^c	2.34	2.14	1.71	2.14
Worth Visiting Again ^d	4.34	3.67	2.25	2.5

^aThe results of this questionnaire referred to Appendix B, I.

^bThis is the average score of the items above this row.

^cThis aspect includes items in Section II.

^dThis aspect includes items 1 and 2 in Section IV.

Table 5 displays the results (the average scores) for these sites' SN features using a five-point Likert scale with 1 being negative and 5 being positive. As shown, 'friending native speakers' and 'getting feedback from other users' were rated the most useful, followed by 'posting writings', and 'reading corrections/comments on other users' posts. 'Creating/Joining a group' got the lowest score. Among the four sites, *Lang-8* again received the highest rating, with ratings all above 4 except for 'creating/editing profile'. *Italki* ranked second, followed by *Polyglotclub* and *LingQ*.

Table 5. User perception of the usefulness of SN features on the four SNSLL

SN Features ^a (1 being negative and 5 being positive)	<i>Lang-8</i>	<i>italki</i>	<i>Polyglotclub</i>	<i>LingQ</i>
Creating/Editing a profile	3.34	3.67	3	2
Friending Native Speakers	4.34	5	3.25	3
Creating/Joining a group	4.34	3.34	1.5	3
Posting writings	4.67	4.47	3	3
Getting feedback from other users	5	5	2.75	3
Giving feedback to other English learners	4.34	3	2.75	3
Sharing learning contents	4	3	3.75	2
Reading corrections/comments	4.67	3.34	2.75	3

^aThe results of this questionnaire referred to Appendix B, III

Participants' responses to the open-ended questions revealed their preferences. Three participants mentioned they liked getting feedback and 'the opportunity [to] get direct contact with native English speakers'. Two participants mentioned they liked the video sharing in *Polyglotclub* and the 'Skype conversation groups' in *LingQ*. What the participants did not like confirmed the usability issues discussed above. For *italki*, participants had such comments as 'adding friends is confusing', 'the filter goes back to the default settings every time I move the page' and 'it is not user friendly designed'. For *Polyglotclub*, one commented: 'sending message and adding friends are a bit confusing'. For *LingQ*, participants stated 'design and menus. It's not very easy to find what you want', and '[it was not easy to] find native speakers to add as friends'. Participants also provided recommendations. For *Lang-8*, one participant recommended: 'Add the opportunity of finding corrections by word or subject'. For *italki*, another suggested to improve the design, especially the navigation, and 'fix some bugs'. As for *Polyglotclub*, participants suggested the website should 'focus more on corrections and video sharing' and 'add a feature that help to find articles, videos or corrections by subject'.

Discussion

Using SNSLL as a teaching tool

Given the above site analyses, we can conclude that all four SNSLL provide the eight essential SN features, but they vary in terms of how they present them and how visible they make them to users. When choosing these SNSLL, ESL teachers should consider their students' needs and characteristics. For example, not all language learners are comfortable interacting online with strangers (Liu *et al.*, 2013). *Lang-8* might work best for this kind of learners because users are not required to share their personal email addresses to register, and

only approved friends can post public messages on another users' profile page. *Lang-8* might also be more appealing for classes that need a strict forum commenting policy because forums in *Lang-8* can be easily moderated. *Italki* and *Polyglotclub* might be preferred for classes with less mature learners because these sites do not allow users to post public messages.

ESL instructors should also consider their purposes and teaching contexts. Certain advanced filters for searching members, such as searching for language proficiency level in *italki* and *Polyglotclub* or user roles in *LingQ*, might be useful to focus instruction on specific aspects of language development and/or find more appropriate partners for a group of students. *Lang-8* might be preferred for instructors looking to encourage social connections among learners using SNSLL because *Lang-8* updates users on their friends' activities via the homepage. Instructors more interested in providing students with opportunities for authentic oral interaction with proficient speakers and in real time may consider using *Polyglotclub*, as this site coordinates face-to-face meetings among members. However, because *Polyglotclub* users need to complete many steps to add potential friends, it might not be the preferred SNSLL for instructors with large classes. Instead, these instructors could use *LingQ* because inviting students to *LingQ* is easier. *LingQ* may also be of interest to instructors hoping to connect language learning activities via SN to learners' already existing online network of friends.

Pedagogical goals are important considerations. If the focus is on getting corrective feedback from networked users on written production, *Lang-8* might be the best choice because users can control the presentation of feedback. Instructors more interested in synchronous communications should instead consider *italki* or *Polyglotclub* because of their text chatting features. However, if the focus is on contextualized vocabulary presentations or receptive aural skills, the tasks for reading and listening in *LingQ* might be a better choice, particularly because instructors can upload their own lessons.

The results of examining SN features available through these sites revealed new and different ways for learners to improve their knowledge of L2 vocabulary, grammar, and culture outside of the language classroom and for teachers to support learning for ESL learners and enhance classroom instruction. To address a lack of research on how SNSLL can be used as a teaching tool, we discussed in detail four sample tasks and provided others in Appendix B. The proposed tasks incorporating SNSLL can be easily integrated into the curriculum and adapted for different language proficiency levels and student needs. These sample tasks were designed to illustrate the different ways in which the four SNSLL can be used to engage learners in reflective thinking, collaboration, and knowledge co-construction with peers using technology tools within a community of practice. Learners' continuous and active engagement with

these collaborative tasks both online and in their language classrooms is likely to bring about modifications in their linguistic competence as well as to reinforce their reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills (Duffy and Cunningham, 1996; Harrison and Thomas, 2009). Also, we purposefully designed the sample tasks in such a way that they would not only promote meaningful and authentic interactions among learners within a community of practice, but also require learners to display the knowledge they internalized during those interactions - both integral components for language learning according to social constructivist principles (Bonk and Cunningham, 1998; Duffy and Cunningham, 1996; Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Future research should investigate the efficacy of the proposed tasks and the collaborative opportunities afforded by the SN features embedded in these sites for facilitating teaching and learning for ESL learners.

Designing SNSLL to facilitate language learning

As Phyo (2003) states, creating a positive experience for users through good website designs can lead to more desirable outcomes. The general usability issues discussed relate to three aspects of design: information design, interface design, and interaction design. Information design refers to the organization of content (Phyo, 2003). Clear and unambiguous content layout and organization can help users find information quickly and easily (Liu *et al.*, 2008). For language learning sites, offering accurate and precise translations is an important issue. Because most content on these SNSLL is user-generated, a characteristic of Web 2.0 technology, dynamically generated content is often available from people around the world. These people will not always have an excellent command of the target language. Hence, language learners need to be aware that not all the available content will be accurate in terms of grammar and language usage.

Other issues that surfaced were related to the sites' interface design, which refers to elements that affect the appearance of a site, such as font, font size, colors, spacing, visuals, icons, labels, and word choices. Interface elements should enhance the presentation of information and make the site easy to navigate (Krug, 2005; Phyo, 2003). Krug (2005) titled his book *Don't Make Me Think* to emphasize the importance of making a website's design intuitive, clear, and user-friendly. Users should be able to figure out how to use a site without having to watch a tutorial. For language learning sites, clear and correct labels and word choices become even more important, especially because the site navigations may not be learners' L1.

The ultimate goal of a website should be to provide a meaningful and enjoyable experience for the purpose of enhancing the way people learn, work, communicate, and interact (Preece *et al.*, 2011; Shedroff, 1994). The ESL participants

reported a number of interaction design issues with the four SNSLL - multiple-step registration, difficult filtering mechanisms, confusing labeling, inaccurate translations, too many advertisements, and technical errors - that affected their experiences using the websites and, ultimately, their perceptions of the usefulness of their services.

These findings of the usability testing highlighted the importance of providing various options to suit learners with different needs, thereby allowing for learner autonomy and control (De Weber *et al.*, 2007; Solomon and Schrum, 2007), and promoting flexibility. As the testing results showed, the learners valued feedback and the opportunity to connect to others. SNSLL should not only make such features available but also ensure their ease of use. SNSLL should also capitalize their SN functions to enhance learning opportunities that can happen while learners use their sites.

The results of users' perceptions were consistent with the usability issues discussed. The sites that were easier to use, especially those allowing for more user control and flexibility (Nokelainen, 2006), were ranked higher and perceived to be more useful (i.e., *Lang-8* and *italki*). The sites that had more usability problems, both general and SN specific, were ranked lower and perceived to be less useful (i.e., *Polyglotclub* and *LingQ*). Information, interface, and interaction designs are intertwined. A well-designed site should consider and incorporate all three designs to provide an overall enriched experience for users. These design considerations are particularly important in sites that aim to provide learning content and support learning (Kukulska-Hulme and Shield, 2004).

Limitations of the Study

Only four SNSLL were selected and only their free features were examined in depth. When choosing an SNSLL for instruction, readers should keep in mind that there are other SNSLL and each has its unique features. According to Nielsen (2012b), most usability issues can be generally identified by five people. Nevertheless, the generalizability of the user-testing findings is limited with six participants. Perhaps the most challenging factor is that websites were the product that the users tested which, given their characteristics, undergo constant updating. Readers are advised to keep these limitations in mind.

Conclusion and implications

This study examined four selected SNSLL from the perspectives of ESL instructors and learners, evaluated their ease of use, and identified their potential uses as teaching and learning tools. The findings indicate that these sites have the potential to facilitate language learning. A key tenet of Web 2.0 technology is that it provides technical capabilities to increase learner autonomy, collaboration, and collective knowledge-building experiences (De

Weber *et al.*, 2007; Solomon and Schrum, 2007). In the social space provided by these SNSLL, native speakers can give feedback to non-native speakers and non-native speakers can seek feedback from native speakers or more proficient language learners (Brick, 2011; Clark and Gruba, 2010; Harrison and Thomas, 2009; Orsini-Jones *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, anyone can upload content that can be a source of common interest amongst group members (Zourou *et al.*, 2012). Taking advantage of these social networking features can maximize students' opportunities for knowledge construction and collaborative language learning through peer interaction and scaffolding, networking, and self-directed learning. Such opportunities can also provide a venue for creating distributed knowledge base and facilitating the establishment of a learning community (Gee, 2004). The tasks created using these sites have provided some examples of how to use these SNSLL as teaching tools using a socio-constructivist approach to language learning. Instructors should explore the new and unique learning opportunities afforded by the SN features embedded in these sites and use them to facilitate teaching and learning for ESL learners. During these explorations, instructors should also take into account that the feedback obtained from these sites is not always accurate. To avoid students' frustrations emerging from inaccurate feedback, teachers could: (a) provide guidelines for students to assess the quality of the feedback obtained; (b) monitor closely student work; and (c) support student's learning with other resources.

The findings of the usability testing highlight the importance of considering the website's information, interface, and interaction designs. Basic tenets of user-center-design, such as considerations of visibility, accessibility, legibility, and language (Norman, 2002), should be followed. SNSs should be as easy to use and as intuitive to navigate as possible. Dynamic content should be encouraged and confusing and/or distracting advertising should be avoided. For SNSLL to be used for teaching and learning, the content should be current, useful, relevant, accurate, and precise. Getting users' input and continually striving to improve site design should help address users' concerns and needs. In conclusion, we hope the findings of this study offer valuable insights to ESL instructors and students as they explore and incorporate SNSLL in their teaching and learning.

Notes

1. Since we performed the analysis and testing, *Lang-8* has discontinued the discussion tool.
2. As of August 2013, *italki* users no longer need to go through a long registration for a sign-up.
3. As of August 2013, *LingQ* does not have the *Friends* button any more but has changed its name to *Exchange* (see Figure 5b), which will take users to the *Language Exchange and Community* page. Yet, the design of the button remains the same.

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Appendix A: Sample usability testing tasks

Exploratory task

Please take 5 minutes to explore the site freely. If you need to register to explore, please do so.

Specific tasks for Lang-8

1. Please write a short self-introduction in English of at least 5 sentences.
2. Please correct a journal entry written by another user in your native language.
3. Please read another user's entry that is written in English, read other users' corrections, and save useful corrections for your future use.

Open-ended tasks for Lang-8

1. Please add a friend from a country where your target language is spoken.
2. Please join a group that you like. If you cannot find one, then please create one.

Appendix B: Site feedback questionnaire

User ID:

Date:

Tested SNS:

This questionnaire is for understanding how you feel about the site you tested. Please rate the site by circling the appropriate number. As you evaluate other sites, you may change ratings for this site later.

I. Feedback on Site Design

	Very Unsatisfied		Neutral		Very Satisfied
1. Ease of finding the information/activities	1	2	3	4	5
2. Quality of information/activities	1	2	3	4	5
3. Ease of reading the text	1	2	3	4	5
4. Appearance of site, including colors and graphics	1	2	3	4	5
5. Speed of pages displaying	1	2	3	4	5
6. Fun, entertainment value	1	2	3	4	5
7. Overall learning experience	1	2	3	4	5
8. Ease of understanding the instruction for activities on the site	1	2	3	4	5
9. Ease of moving around the site without getting lost	1	2	3	4	5

II. In your opinion, does this site help you improve the following English skills?

	Not Very Helpful		Neutral		Very Helpful	
1. Speaking	1	2	3	4	5	
2. Listening	1	2	3	4	5	
3. Reading	1	2	3	4	5	
4. Writing	1	2	3	4	5	
5. Grammar	1	2	3	4	5	
6. Vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5	
7. Culture	1	2	3	4	5	

III. Were the following features helpful to you in learning English?

	Used:	Not Useful at all	Neutral	Very Useful	
1. Creating/Editing a profile	Yes / No	1	2	3	4 5
2. Friending Native Speakers		1	2	3	4 5
3. Creating/Joining a group		1	2	3	4 5
4. Posting writings		1	2	3	4 5
5. Getting feedback from other users		1	2	3	4 5
6. Giving feedback to other English learners		1	2	3	4 5
7. Sharing learning contents		1	2	3	4 5
8. Reading corrections/comments on other user's posts		1	2	3	4 5

Did you use any other features during the test session? YES – NO

If yes, what did you think about these features?

IV. Future Use and Perception

1. How likely are you to return to this site on your own?

No way 1 2 3 4 5 I'll probably return the next time I sit down at my computer.

Explain why you are or are not likely to return to this site.

2. Would you recommend this site to your friends who are learning English?

No way 1 2 3 4 5 I'll definitely recommend this site.

Explain why you would or you would not recommend this site.



3. What do you like best about this site?



4. What do you like least about this site?



5. Do you have any recommendations or comments to improve this site?



Appendix C: Sample language learning tasks



Lang-8

Go to  and correct three L1 entries using . In the comments section below each correction, describe in English why you made your corrections.

Go to , select the *Latest Entries* tab, and offer three instances of corrective feedback on other users' L2 entries using . Explain each correction in the comments section below.


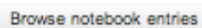
Go to  and  three L2 written entries for feedback. Decide what corrections from *Lang-8* users you will accept or reject. Bring to class a brief report justifying your decisions.



Go to  and  an essay entry that follows the conventions for paragraph structure. Whenever appropriate and possible, make corrections to your essay based on other users' feedback. Bring to class the revised essay and a brief report justifying your corrections.


Go to  and  an entry asking for clarification on a topic, idiomatic expression, vocabulary word, or grammar rule you have difficulty understanding. Report back to the class any clarifications from *Lang-8* users.

Go to the feedback you got for one of your entries and respond to five instances of corrective feedback. You can tag the feedback as good, quote it in response, or add it to the *Notebook* tab of your user profile for later reference.

italki

Go to  and choose  and select your L1 under *Written In*. Then provide corrective feedback and comments to three entries. Alternatively, pair up with another student and provide each other feedback on your English entries.

Go to  and  three L2 written entries for feedback. Decide what corrections from *italki* users you will accept or reject. Bring to class a brief report justifying your decisions.

Go to  and type a brief language-related question in English in the textbox. Click on *Ask a question* to provide details. Select English under *This*

question is for learning and click [Submit](#). If you receive an answer, discuss its accuracy in class; if not, discuss possible answers.

Go to [Language Partners](#) and browse entries. Once you have selected a language partner, submit a request to chat on Skype. Then, go to [Notebook](#) and post your learning goals for this exchange and other relevant information (meeting time, expected duration of the talk, target language, etc.). After the online exchange, return to [Notebook](#) to post a reflection on your conversation.

Record your *Skype* conversation with a native speaker using a free voice recording application on a computer or cell phone. Transcribe your conversation for listening and writing practice, and bring a reflection on some aspect of language use that you learned, did not understand, or found interesting.


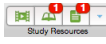
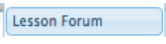
Go to [Discussions](#) and click on [Start a new discussion](#) to create a new thread, or reply to other users' threads.






LingQ

Videos explaining how to use the lessons on *LingQ* can be found under [Academy](#).


Go to [Learn](#) and choose *Library*, choose level of materials (left side of the screen), and search for the topic of your choice. Listen to the text first and study the vocabulary. New vocabulary is automatically highlighted in blue. Click on each blue item to create a *LingQ*, or vocabulary gloss. You may select from three L1 hints or search online dictionaries. After creating a *LingQ*, the term will be highlighted in yellow. You can also indicate known words, which will remove highlighting. After all blue *LingQs* are converted to yellow, click on [10 LingQs](#) to practice your new knowledge in cloze and/or multiple-choice tests provided on the site. Alternatively, review some of your new *LingQs* from the lesson and explain to a partner why you chose this particular hint over the other options.




Go to [Learn](#) and choose *Library* and listen to three short lessons. Create *LingQs* for new vocabulary words in the transcripts. Check the accuracy of your synonyms/definitions with a dictionary.



Go to  and choose *Library* and listen to a lesson. Click on the  icons above *Study Resources* and select  to initiate pronunciation questions on words in the lesson.




Click on  and select the forum of your choice, or create a new thread on . Then select  [Post and Submit for Correction](#) or  to add your comments. Return to  later to see other users' feedback/comments. Discuss the feedback in class.


Polyglotclub

Go to  [Chat Room](#) and initiate a discussion on any topic in the target language. Submit a short reflection on your interaction.

Go to  [Corrections](#)  and select . Then write an entry with a classmate and post it for feedback. Bring to class a corrected version of your entry.

Go to  [Videos](#) and watch learning videos on three grammar items you have been learning in class or that interest you. Go to  [My Questions](#) and post three questions related to those grammar items.

Go to  [Videos](#) and add new videos on two aspects of your L1 or L2 culture. Go to  [Corrections](#)  and post a description for each video you uploaded.

Go to  [Videos](#), select one to watch, and then submit a summary explaining why you chose it, what you learned from it, and what you liked or did not like about it in the comments section.