

WEB-BASED JOURNALS IN THE CLASSROOM: MOTIVATION AND AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

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Abstract: The use of Web 2.0 in the language classroom is an area of exploration and interest to many. In recent years, much research has looked at the use of blogs in the assistance of language development, and this paper continues in a similar fashion. One key area where this paper adds to the field however, is that it looks at a Web 2.0 portal specifically aimed at language learners; the portal in question is Lang-8, which in conjunction with being similar to a blogging platform, also provides similar functions to a social networking service. This research exposed 12 Korean participants to Lang-8 as part of a credit-bearing university writing course. The participants made weekly journal entries on Lang-8, and upon completion of the course, were given an anonymous online survey to complete. The survey addressed areas relating to online language journals, corrective feedback, motivation, and learner autonomy. Overall, the participants reported that the use of Lang-8 positively affected their motivation levels, had positive experiences through received varied corrective feedback, and were exposed to a portal that allowed for more autonomous learning.

Keywords: Web 2.0, SNS, motivation, learner autonomy, corrective feedback

Computer-mediated communication is a reality of daily life for many, but it is often overlooked as a language learning tool. This paper will explore an interactive portal, Lang-8 (n.d.), which holds similar functions to a social networking service (SNS), combined with the feel of a blog, all specifically constructed for language learners. The portals aim is to develop writing skills. However, there is the potential for other areas to be exploited with a little creativity. This paper will focus on the integration of Lang-8 into a writing course at a Korean university. The premise for the study will be to assess the motivation and autonomy of the participants, and how Lang-8 affects the participants in these areas.

The transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 has lead to those around the world being linked by computer-mediated communication tools, blogs, and SNS more easily, and in conjunction with this transformation of reality, there is also a transformation taking place in relation to computer-assisted language learning (CALL) (Chapelle, 2010; Conole, 2008). The time has passed where CALL primarily refers to the CD-ROM and is more likely to refer to a blended approach that makes use of complimentary websites or content management systems, such as *Moodle* (Chapelle, 2010).

According to Tomlinson (2003), the selection of materials for the language classroom should offer some kind of *shock factor* that exposes the learner to elements

that engage and offer variety in the learning environment, while at the same time allowing them to focus on the target language. Taking Tomlinson's suggestion into consideration would suggest that an SNS-like platform or blog might provide this shock factor. SNS is possibly already a part of the learner's lifestyle, and yet, SNS in the language learning environment still appears to be partially avoided. A logical explanation for the avoidance is perhaps due to the monitoring that is required in order to ensure that the learners are being exposed to input of an appropriate nature. However, the social context that underpins SNS has the potential to offer benefits to the language learner across a number of levels.

Barkhuizen (2004) advocates that language learning takes place in social settings, which supports the idea of SNS as a language learning tool. Offering less of an explicit social context, but being more widely accepted and utilised in the language classroom while still showing degrees of success are blogs (de Almeida Soares, 2008; Lee, 2010). A number of the participants from de Almeida Soares' (2008) study make reference to the interactive nature of blogs as a motivator that encourages them to write more frequently or with greater care. This can be attributed to the social interaction that is facilitated through the comment feature on a blog, enabling readers outside of the learner's own classroom context to interact directly with them.

Having people otherwise unbeknownst to the learner interact directly with their language production is something that provides motivation. The knowledge that the language they produced was received intelligibly, in conjunction with the social

aspect of the exchange itself, adds the human aspect of communication and a sense of reality to their language learning (Chapelle, 2010; de Almeida Soares, 2008; Jung, 2011; Lee, 2010; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010; Sasaki & Takeuchi, 2009). Ellis (2004) and Thorne (2003) extend the notion that the social aspect can affect the language learner through making reference to the development of relationships and friendships. They suggest that the ability for learners to form *friendships* – even online – can result in greater motivation levels.

Ellis (2008) notes that motivation can impact the learning behaviour and attitude of the language learner, and it is with this in mind, that the notion of learner of autonomy needs to be addressed. If the language learner is on the receiving end of a positive experience due to the social interaction that is taking place through the communicative aspects of their blogging, then perhaps the learner is transitioning into a learner that is more autonomous in nature. It is suggested that when the learners are enjoying positive experiences that have been largely instigated under their own free will, then they are more likely to take control of their language learning and become autonomous (Gardner, Ginsberg & Smythe, 1976; Lee, 2010; Spratt, Humphreys & Chan, 2002). However, while language learning may be bound with the social context, the language classroom should also offer feedback of the corrective variety, and as a result, one must consider how corrective feedback can affect the otherwise motivating and autonomy-building nature of the blog.

In the language classroom, directive feedback that looks at the sentence level production of the learner is often utilised,

particularly in education systems that show a preference for a teacher-centred curriculum. In relation to directive feedback initiated by the teacher, it has been suggested that over-correction can have a demotivating effect on the learner, whereas facilitative feedback – feedback which primarily focuses on organisational aspects – can have a positive effect (Boramy, 2010). It is interesting to note that when directive feedback is initiated by the learner's peers, it too, also seems to have a positive effect on the learner's motivation levels (Hirose, 2012; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010).

The issue therefore seems to be, that educators must be able to strike a balance between providing learners with teacher-initiated facilitative feedback, peer-initiated directive feedback, and the social aspect of an SNS-like platform with blog capabilities. A search of the internet turns up several such sites that appear to fit the above criteria, with Lang-8 and i-Talk-i (n.d.) being two of the most prominent. Both sites offer free registration, blog-like capabilities within an SNS-like platform, and the opportunity to receive directive feedback from their peer network. However, while both of these portals are explicitly designed for independent language learners, there appears to be little research done on their effectiveness in the classroom context.

METHOD

Objectives

The objective of this study has the overarching goal of assessing the affect that an online language learning journal platform has on language learning, motivation levels, and learner autonomy. In order to assess this, the study will attempt

to shed light on three key questions: 1) How do language learners view online language learning journals?, 2) To what extent and in which areas do online language learning journals affect language learning?, and 3) To what extent does corrective and peer feedback from online language learning journals affect language learners' motivation and autonomy levels?

Participants

The participants of this study numbered 12 in total. All participants were Korean university students in their third or fourth year of a four-year undergraduate program participating in a credit-bearing writing course. Of the participants, eight were female, four were male, and all were between the ages of 21 and 30.

Instrument

Over the course of a 15-week semester, the participants kept a weekly online language learning journal with Lang-8 as a requirement for their course. At the close of the semester, the participants were given access to an anonymous online survey directed at Lang-8 and language learning, peer feedback, and motivation. Of the ten questions present in the survey, seven allowed for qualitative feedback in the form of an open response to the question posed.

FINDINGS

In order to attempt to answer three questions proposed above in a more informed manner, a firm foundation of the participants' background and experience with online and offline language learning journals needed to be established. The findings note that prior to this 15-week course's exposure to Lang-8, just 5 of the

12 participants had kept a traditional – offline – language learning journal. Of these five, two of the participants state that a mandatory diary written on a weekly basis was their only other exposure to journal writing:

A06: I have been writing an English journal for my class once a week.

A09: Once in week. It is kind of diary

or daily story.

Just one participant suggests that they have kept a language learning journal for the purposes of improving their English ability:

A07: Yes, because I need practice.

Table 1: Participants with prior exposure to keeping language learning journals

Offline Journal Users	5
Web-based Journal Users	2

Prior to this course, just two of the participants had used Lang-8. Both participants claim to have used Lang-8 in excess of one year, and had consistently kept a web-based journal on a weekly basis for the purposes of self-study. With the introduction of this course’s web-based

journal requirement, all participants became familiar with Lang-8, and were free to set the privacy levels of their journal to their liking. As a result, 8 of the 12 participants made their journals publicly available, while four opted to only allow their teacher to view their journal entries.

Table 2: Lang-8 profile privacy settings

Viewable by Public	8
Only Viewable by Teacher	4

In spite of four participants seeming not to use the social side of Lang-8 by only allowing their profiles and journals to be viewed by their teacher, all twelve participants viewed Lang-8 positively overall when fronted with the subjective question of ‘Do you like using Lang-8 (or online journals)?’. When this area was probed deeper, 11 of the 12 participants reported that Lang-8 was more useful for language learning than a more traditional journal. The support for the participants’ beliefs fell under several categories.

Several comments from the participants were generic in nature, and could be applied to either online or offline

language learning journals as they explicitly make reference to grammatical accuracy, and the act or frequency of writing:

A07: Because I can practice grammar forms and know my mistake.

A10: I think it is useful when I keep using it everyday.

A11: Expressing my own idea is useful.

A12: I think 'Writing' is also important!!

More specific to Lang-8, the social aspect and available interaction on the website were also noted:

A02: We can communicate with native speakers directly.

A10: It is good to using because there are many people who interested in writing.

A12: I like that anyone can help me on my English skill.

With respect to the single participant who preferred traditional language learning journals, it may not be an issue with Lang-8 per se, but more of an issue with the nature of technology in general:

A08: I am not a friendly to typing. It is really useful site for learning language student.

However, a specific issue that is relevant to Lang-8 was raised:

A12: Sometimes, no one read my journal. Except that, I like it.

Taking the responses of the participants into consideration, it is possible to see that in relation to research question one – ‘How do language learners view online language learning journals?’ – the overall consensus is positively, with 11 of the 12 participants stating that they prefer Lang-8 over a more traditional language learning journal.

Research question two – ‘To what extent and in which areas do online language learning journals affect language learning?’ – builds on the positive impression Lang-8 has left, with the participants suggesting a number of areas where they believe that their language learning has been affected. It is not a surprise that half of the participants – 6 of 12 – note that through keeping an online language learning journal their writing skills have been affected. It is however, interesting to note that when the participants note their writing skills, they

are often referring to grammatical accuracy or accuracy in expression:

A01: My writing has improved as well as my conversational skills – although, not fluency of speaking, just the style of conversation

A02: I compared my first and latest journal, and I think that my writing skill became better.

A03: I think my English vocabulary has increased.

A06: Having somebody to pick my mistakes on Lang-8 helps me a lot.

A07: It made my grammar skills improve.

A12: When I write journal, I always concern about my errors that I made before.

If we probe the responses deeper, *A01* even suggests that their discourse strategies have been affected by keeping an online language learning journal. This may not appear to be the norm. However, one possible factor that crosses into the realm of discourse strategies may be attributed to the social networking nature of Lang-8, where users of the website communicate with one another directly, in addition to writing their own language learning journal. The very nature of the communicative act is an area the participants have noted as affecting their language learning:

A02: My friends told me that my language has developed.

A05: Native told me exact expression

A06: Having somebody to pick my mistakes on Lang-8 helps me a lot.

A08: It really good I think when many people commented my writing.

The epitome of the social nature of Lang-8 is evident in *A02*'s comment, ‘My friends told me...’, where the friends they

are speaking of are, in fact, social networking ‘friends’ on Lang-8. A02 continues to mention the potential for developing relationships through Lang-8 in order to not only build friendships, but to develop other aspects of their language development:

A02: We can communicate with native speakers directly. And if we able to make a good relationship with native speakers, we can have they other accounts such as Skype or YM. So, we can brush our speaking capability with them.

The final research question – ‘To what extent does corrective and peer feedback from online language learning journals affect language learners’ motivation and autonomy levels?’ – draws upon the social nature and communicative aspects of Lang-8, with the majority of comments being inherently positive.

At its most fundamental, Lang-8 is a website which allows language learners to receive feedback on their written journals. When prompted with the question, ‘How do you feel when someone corrects your Lang-8 writing?’, the participants were overwhelmingly positive:

A01: I get motivated to write more.

A07: Feel so good.

A08: Happy. I feel really thank you.

A09: Great. I like it.

A10: Good. I think that I need to do more study

A11: Good. Being proud of myself.

A12: I think it’s really nice. I think I should study English more and more.

However, the positives of having a pool of ‘native’ speakers to check your written work is also one of the potential drawbacks of a website such as Lang-8:

A08: Sometimes it is confuse to different corrects.

The issue noted by A08 is one which may be especially pertinent to lower level language learners that do not have access to a developed framework in order to take more complete control of their autonomous learning journey.

Irrespective of the potential confusion that may come through excessive corrections, the participants claim to have experienced an increase in their motivation levels through the use and experience of Lang-8. While the participants claim to be more motivated overall, there is no single root to the motivation growth. Several participants appear to be extrinsically motivated by a fear of failure:

A09: I want to write correct sentence.

A12: I have more errors than I expected. So, it motivated me.

Several appear to be extrinsically motivated by the notion that they are pleasing their ‘friends’:

A02: When I communicate with other friends who learn the same language as mine, I got a motivation to learn more and more. Now I try to write something even if it just a sentence.

Learn everyday, even just 30 minutes.

A03: My friends comment may affect my motivation

A08: Someone corrects and comments give some power of study.

And several appear to be intrinsically motivated:

A01: Positively; having a number of people offer feedback has helped my language skills.

A05: I want to write in my diary.

A06: It keeps my motivation alive

A11: Good. Being proud of myself.

In spite of there not being a single source for the motivation of the participants, it is important to note that the motivation to write in the target language has increased in 10 of the 12 participants, with the remaining two participants noting no noticeable change.

The increased motivation levels of the participants go part of the way to suggesting that their learner autonomy will also increase. However, it is interesting to note that despite the array of positive feedback the participants have given Lang-8 and online language learning journals, 7 of the 12 participants still prefer corrections on their writing from their teacher, rather than from another 'native' speaker, as in the case of Lang-8. This suggests that, while the participants claim to be motivated to take control of their own learning with Lang-8, perhaps they are not 'ready' to be released from the watchful eye of their teacher.

DISCUSSION

Many of the positive comments from the participants in relation to the use of Lang-8 for online language learning journals are interlaced with the social aspects, and SNS-like nature, of the website. It would appear that one of the biggest draws to Lang-8 is the ability for language learners to directly interact with L1 speakers of the language they are learning. Several participants make direct reference to the direct communication with L1 speakers:

A02: We can communicate with native speakers directly.

A05: Native told me exact expression

Direct access to L1 speakers is often seen as a source of motivation. The interactive nature of a portal such as Lang-8 can be taken to be similar in nature to a

blog, as it does have a similar Web 2.0 commenting capability. These interactive capabilities have been noted as a source of motivation in the sense that they can encourage learners to write more frequently (de Almeida Soares, 2008). Participants of the current study support de Almeida Soares' assertion that social interaction may enhance the desire to produce more frequently:

A01: I get motivated to write more.

A02: When I communicate with other friends who learn the same language as mine, I got a motivation to learn more and more. Now I try to write something even if it just a sentence.

Learn everyday, even just 30 minutes.

A03: My friends comment may affect my motivation

A08: Someone corrects and comments give some power of study.

If positive interaction can affect learners positively, it stands to reason that negative interaction can affect learners in an inverse manner. One participant made the observation regarding a lack of feedback and its negative effect:

A12: Sometimes, no one read my journal. Except that, I like it.

There are however, a number of possible explanations for having a limited number of readers of one's online language learning journal. At the base level, English is the language being learnt by the participants of this study, and English is also the most common language being learnt on Lang-8. The first page of the 'Latest Entries' has twenty listings, fifteen of which are English; the second page also shows fifteen of twenty listings as English. The sheer abundance of English entries may make it difficult to have a journal

entry read and corrected by multiple L1 speakers.

An additional possible explanation is the *quid pro quo* essence of Lang-8. Language learners are relying on the goodwill of other language learners for feedback on their writing. However, a relationship of all take and little give is not beneficial to both parties. The premise of Lang-8, and other online language learning portals, is that L1 speakers of a language assist learners of that language. Therefore, the Korean participants of this study should, in their best interests and as L1 speakers of Korean, assist learners of Korean with their writing. A closer look at the Lang-8 profiles of the participants suggests that this *quid pro quo* relationship is not a reality for several of the participants.

The participants could be loosely split into two groups: those who assisted Korean learners, and those who did not. The group who assisted Korean learners received an average of two to three corrections and comments for each of their journal entries. They offered corrections at an approximate ratio of 1:1. For instance, if a participant wrote 15 English journal entries, they corrected 15 Korean journal entries for the Lang-8 community. In contrast, the group who did not assist Korean learners received approximately one correction or comment for each of their journal entries. Participants from this group offered very little feedback to the Korean learning community on Lang-8; for every 15 English journals that they wrote, they corrected fewer than 5 Korean journal entries. The majority of the feedback the 'unhelpful' participants received was actually from their teacher, and not the true Lang-8 community, which supports the

finding that 7 of the 12 participants still preferred written corrections and feedback from their teacher. It should also be noted again that 4 of the 12 participants opted to have their journal entries only viewable by their teacher, which offers an alternative rationale behind the lack of public feedback received.

The suggestion that Lang-8 users offering corrections at a 1:1 ratio are received more positively by the Lang-8 community, and also attain a more diverse feedback portfolio, is one which enhances the motivating aspects of social interaction to which de Almeida Soares (2008) and the participants allude:

A01: Having a number of people offer feedback has helped my language skills.

A05: I want to write in my diary.

A06: It keeps my motivation alive

A08: It really good I think when many people commented my writing.

Taking the notion of increased motivation through interaction a step further and advancing into the human aspect of communication, and in particular, the positive potential which blossoms from the development of relationships and friendships through social interaction, we are again, drawn toward the motivating aspects of Lang-8 (Ellis, 2004; Thorne, 2003). At the heart of SNS is friendship, and that human element of social interaction which is supported by Barkhuizen, (2004) as being a prime factor in language learning. Lang-8 appears to offer its users an SNS-like platform, joining members with the common interest of language and cultural exchange, and opens the door to the possibility of friendship, even in the online realm. While several participants allude to friendship,

two in particular – A02 and A03 – explicitly discuss their friendships as being social factors which are motivational toward their language development:

A02: My friends told me that my language has developed.

A02: We can communicate with native speakers directly. And if we able to make a good relationship with native speakers, we can have they other accounts such as Skype or YM. So, we can brush our speaking capability with them.

A02: When I communicate with other friends who learn the same language as mine, I got a motivation to learn more and more. Now I try to write something even if it just a sentence.

Learn everyday, even just 30 minutes.

A03: My friends comment may affect my motivation

In spite of the positives, which may arise through social interaction and the development of friendships, an additional piece in the language learning puzzle is that of feedback. Sentence level, directive feedback is often employed in the language learning process, and is suggested to have a strong presence in teacher-centred curricula and education systems, such as that in Korea. According to Boramy (2010), the major issue with directive feedback is that if over-correction occurs, it can have a demotivating effect on the learner. In contrast, facilitative feedback, which focuses on organisation aspects, can have a motivating effect. Peer-initiated directive feedback however, is suggested to have a motivating effect (Hirose, 2012; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010). Comments from the participants tend to support the suggestion that peer-initiated directive feedback is positive:

A01: I get motivated to write more.

A05: I want to write in my diary.

A06: Having somebody to pick my mistakes on Lang-8 helps me a lot.

A07: It made my grammar skills improve.

A12: I have more errors than I expected. So, it motivated me.

Upon deeper inspection of the participants' comments, taken in conjunction with the style of correction on Lang-8, it is of interest to the writing instruction community that even if over-correction occurs in a peer-initiated domain, motivation levels appear to be positively affected.

Currently, it is unclear as to the reasoning behind the participants' perception that peer-initiated directive feedback is a motivating aspect of Lang-8, and this is an area which is in need of deeper analysis in the future. One possible explanation may be partly down to the SNS nature and community aspect of Lang-8, as many participants commented on being thankful and appreciative of the Lang-8 community for assisting their language learning:

A07: Feel so good.

A08: Happy. I feel really thank you.

A12: I think it's really nice. I think I should study English more and more.

One thing is clear from the findings however, and that is, the participants believe that their language skills have developed through the use of Lang-8:

A01: My writing has improved as well as my conversational skills – although, not fluency of speaking, just the style of conversation

A02: I compared my first and latest journal, and I think that my writing skill became better.

A03: *I think my English vocabulary has increased.*

A06: *Having somebody to pick my mistakes on Lang-8 helps me a lot.*

A07: *It made my grammar skills improve.*

A10: *I think it is useful when I keep using it everyday.*

A12: *When I write journal, I always concern about my errors that I made before.*

Again though, without a more quantifiable record of the participants' language development through the consistent use of Lang-8, the measurement is merely the perceptions of the participants' own language development. This is not to say, language learners merely holding the perception of development is negative. On the contrary, the positive experience in itself has the potential to develop learner autonomy (Gardner et al., 1976; Lee, 2010; Spratt et al., 2002). In support of this, there is a suggestion of autonomous learning coming to fore, with 10 of the 12 participants noting an increase in their motivation to write in the target language, as well as a series of more directed comments being produced:

A01: *I get motivated to write more.*

A02: *Now I try to write something even if it just a sentence. Learn everyday, even just 30 minutes.*

A05: *I want to write in my diary.*

A10: *I think that I need to do more study*

A12: *I think I should study English more and more.*

Which, if the overall positive tilt of the participants' comments are taken in conjunction with the feedback that 11 of the 12 participants prefer Lang-8 to more traditional language learning journals, there

is perhaps a further need for an extended study in the area in the hopes of developing more motivated and autonomous language learners.

CONCLUSION

This paper has primarily looked at learner motivation through the extended use of an SNS-like language learning portal – Lang-8 – and has returned some telling feedback from the participants. Overall, it appears that the use of Lang-8 is a positive force in developing and maintaining learners' motivation, as well as exposing the learners to an opportunity for autonomous language development. However, there are a number of caveats that should be mentioned.

Perhaps the most important caveat to mention in relation to the success of Lang-8 is the *quid-pro-quo* notion of the portal. The participants of this study could be divided into those who helped learners of Korean, and those who did not. Overall, those who offered assistance to learners of Korean and interacted more with other users of the website, fared better. This sits in-line with the SNS-like atmosphere of Lang-8, and pushes the social aspect as a primary factor in whether learners receive the greatest possible benefit from the website, or merely a watered-down version with more inconsistent feedback and interaction.

An additional benefit that seems to come through a greater degree of interaction is the opportunity for the development of friendship. The development of friendship through the SNS-like atmosphere seems to increase learner autonomy in the learner, as well as exposing the learners to a greater degree of reality in terms of English communication; in the EFL context, it is often a challenge

to show English as a tangible reality to many learners once they leave the confines of the classroom and the gaze of their teacher. Lang-8 brings the reality of English communication closer to the learner.

Not surprisingly, extended use of Lang-8 is reported to have a positive effect on the development of language skills. As this study did not measure skill development, there is room for further research of a more quantifiable nature to be undertaken. Closely related to skill development is also the primary function of Lang-8 – directive feedback at the sentence level. If Lang-8 is to be used as part of a class, a caveat for the teacher implementing its use is to monitor the peer-initiated feedback received by their students in a form of quality control.

Overall however, Lang-8 and similar language learning portals seem to hold the potential for integration into a language learner's repertoire. There are reports of motivation levels and autonomy being positively affected, as well as language skills developing, and the exposure to genuine communication with L1 users of the language being learnt. While this study was conducted with learners of English, it appears that Lang-8 and similar portals have an English language learner majority. The majority population of the English language learner on these portals may lead to deeper consideration when determining the suitability for the specific context; it would probably be less of a consideration if English were not the language being learnt, as the sheer abundance of other English learners, and the battle for the attention of L1 English users is a major pitfall in the EFL context, but a major boon

in the Language Other Than English (LOTE) context.

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