Learning languages and culture using *HiNative*

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Introduction

HiNative (https://hinative.com)[1] is a question/answer application designed for language learners. Users can ask native speakers questions related to over 110 languages and culture[2]. This application is particularly useful when learners want to ask native speakers short questions, though the speakers are not available on the spot. The nine types of pre-designed question formats guide the users to formulate their questions and native speakers generally provide the answers within a few hours and sometimes within a few minutes. The popularity of the application is evident in the growing number of users. By August 2018, user numbers had reached 3,410,000, with services being offered for 110 languages in 240 regions[3]. This paper reviews the features of the *HiNative* application and the pedagogical implications of its use.

Features of the application

The aim of *HiNative* is to promote users' learning of language and culture by providing a question/answer platform. Users can post short questions related to over 110 languages and cultures using the platform. To enable users to post their questions easily, *HiNative* provides nine types of pre-designed question formats, such as: "How do you say ... in your language?"; "Is this expression natural?"; and "Free questions". To formulate the questions, users can use written words as well as an image and a short audio recording file. They can generally receive feedback from the native speakers shortly after posting their questions. The application provides both website- and smartphone-based platforms. As it takes little time for users to post short questions and to check the feedback, busy learners can use the smartphone platform to engage in anytime and anywhere learning using their downtime. Learners who do not have many native speaker friends of whom to ask questions can use the application to access native speaker knowledge quickly and easily.

In addition to *HiNative*, there are alternative platforms which learners can use to ask language- and culture-related questions, including language-exchange applications such as *Speaky* (https://www.speaky.com) and Social Network Services for language learners such as *HelloTalk* (https://www.hellotalk.com). However, what distinguishes *HiNative* from these applications is the specific focus on posting questions and receiving responses to them. Unlike *Speaky* and

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[1] This paper is written based on information available by July 8, 2020.
[2] A *HiNative developer, Lang-8, describes the service at* https://lang-8.jp/en/
[3] The number of *HiNative* users can be confirmed at https://thebridge.jp/en/2018/09/hinative-jpy650m-funding (The author accessed the website on January 3, 2019).

HelloTalk, HiNative does not provide a function for social networking with the native speakers or for searching them and exchanging personal messages with them. However, for learners who just want to receive native speaker feedback without socialising with them, this is a strength. Moreover, unlike *HelloTalk*, *HiNative* helpfully signposts users to question/answer posts from multiple users per question category. Such classification design allows learners who want to use other members' posts as a learning resource to browse posts easily for their chosen category.

Use of the application is free, although the premium edition provides a greater range of functions for a small fee. Users who want to use this can choose to pay either annually (about 9600 yen) or monthly (about 1200 yen). Table 1 compares the functions provided for non-premium and premium members.

Table 1: Comparison of functions provided for non-premium and premium members

Functions provided by *HiNative*	Premium members	Non-premium members
Use all question templates	●	**X (A template for requesting language corrections is available only to premium members.)**
Notify arrival of feedback to own questions	●	●
Notify arrival of feedback to the questions the user has bookmarked	●	**X**
Search older posts uploaded by the user	●	●
Search bookmarked posts	●	**X**
Ticket to prioritise questions to receive further feedback from native speakers	**10 times per month**	**3 times in total**
Play audio recording feedback provided by native speakers to the user	●	●
Play audio recording feedback provided by native speaker to other users	●	**X**
Input messages using voice recognition system	△	△
Remove advertisements	●	**X**

As table 1 indicates, the premium edition of *HiNative* provides advanced functions to enhance language learning on the platform. The functions include the ability to: 1) receive native speaker language corrections to short sentences; 2) prioritise to indicate which posts are to receive further feedback; 3) search the users' bookmarked posts for review; and 4) play audio recordings by native speakers for other users to learn from the audio recordings. Image 1 provides a screenshot of the page to upload a question. To cater to the different needs of

learners, *HiNative* provides two options: 1) types of questions the learner can post; and 2) types of communication modes (see image 1), such as the typed word, an uploaded image or ten-second audio recording and a message inputted using a voice-recognition system via a smartphone. Users can also input their *question* using the voice recognition system, though it may not effectively recognise learners' utterances in their target language.
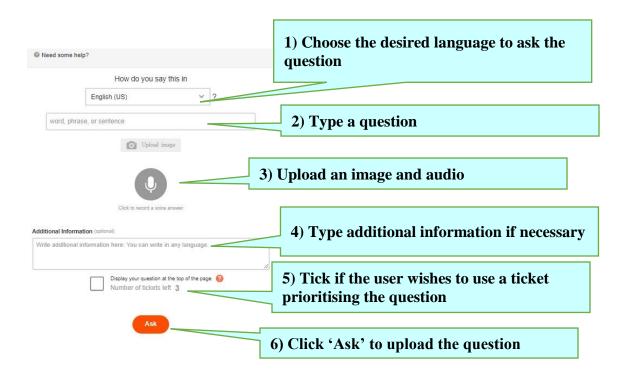

1) Choose the desired language to ask the question

2) Type a question

3) Upload an image and audio

4) Type additional information if necessary

5) Tick if the user wishes to use a ticket prioritising the question

6) Click 'Ask' to upload the question

Image 1: Template for 'How do you say this?'

The design of *HiNative* is based on the principle of 'tandem learning' – namely learning via reciprocity and autonomy (Little and Brammerts, 1996). Vinagre and Lera (2008) characterise the concept of 'reciprocity' as members mutually supporting each other, contributing and gaining benefit at an equal level and taking on an equal role. The principle of 'autonomy' refers to learners working in tandem to take responsibility for their own learning and learning by their peers. Little and Brammerts (*op.cit.*) suggested that learners provide their language learning partners with corrections and suggestions for improvement using their expert knowledge of the target language and culture. To motivate the native speakers to provide speedy and quality feedback to the learners, *HiNative* adopts gamification, a feature where they can raise their ranking by providing speedy feedback to language learners and by receiving a positive evaluation from the recipient of the feedback.

SWOT analysis of *HiNative*

Using *HiNative* to learn a language and the culture in which it is embedded has its pros and cons. Table 1 indicates the results of a SWOT analysis for *HiNative*. The upper level rows

indicate the internal strengths and weaknesses, whereas the lower rows indicate the external opportunities and threats.

Table 1: *HiNative* SWOT analysis results

Strengths	Weaknesses
1. Easy to post a short question using the predesigned question templates 2. Does not require much time to complete posting questions and checking the native speaker responses. → encourages busy learners to engage in language learning 3. Users can post questions either by typing text messages, inputting text messages using the voice-recognition system or uploading an image or audio recording. → can adopt *HiNative* at beginners' level 4. Simple interactions in an open space → can reduce learners' hesitation to interact with native speaker strangers	1. Can post a short question with a ten-second audio recording or an image. → can be used only for activities requiring short questions 2. A temperate for requesting language corrections is available only to the premium users. →need to purchase the premium account to receive language corrections or use alternative applications 3. Does not provide functions to add members as a friend or to send personal messages to them. → need to use the alternative online platforms to socialise with native speakers
Opportunities	Threats
1. Users can engage in anytime and anywhere learning 2. Users can receive multiple feedback from different native speakers → can learn variations of languages and cultural practices by comparing the feedback from multiple native speakers	1. The response speed and the amount of feedback varies depending on the availability of the native speakers who are willing to answer the question 2. The quality of feedback varies depending on the native speaker's language knowledge and ability to clarify answers 3. The effectiveness of the voice-recognition input function depends on the user's pronunciation

The major internal strength of *HiNative* is the simple platform design. Even non-tech-savvy users can easily navigate the platform, thanks to its simple and explicit design. They can easily post a short question, using nine pre-designed question templates. Secondly, the short task design is also a strength, in engaging busy learners in language learning with a small-time investment. It takes only a few minutes for learners to post a short question and check the native speaker responses. Educators can therefore suggest that learners adopt *HiNative* as a platform to learn languages during their downtime. Thirdly, *HiNative* has the capability to post questions using multiple modes: typed words, images and audio recordings. The multimodal capability is a strength, encouraging even beginners, who cannot yet type in target languages, to engage in language learning using *HiNative*. For example, educators teaching beginner level can still provide homework requiring learners to ask culture-related questions using an image. Fourthly, the simple interaction design in an open space – 'Question and Answer' – is a

strength, for it reduces learners' hesitation about interacting with native speaker strangers for a language learning purpose. Learners may feel less hesitation in posting questions via *HiNative* as such activities do not require them to exchange personal messages in a closed online space. Given these benefits, educators can adopt HiNative as an introductory activity to engage learners in online interactions with native speakers.

Learning opportunities on *HiNative* are affected by external factors. The main external opportunity for language learning on *HiNative* is the capability to engage in language learning anytime and anywhere. However, to use *HiNative* for anytime and anywhere learning purposes, learners need to have a smartphone, Wi-Fi access, and enough smartphone data. Another external opportunity of language learning with *HiNative* is the capability to receive feedback from multiple native speakers. Given the opportunity, educators can integrate learning activities requiring learners to compare multiple feedback provided by the native speakers to understand variations of their language use, cultural practices and perspectives of a certain topic. However, these learning opportunities also depend on the availability of multiple native speakers willing to answer the questions.

Despite the strengths and opportunities for language learning available via *HiNative*, the application has several internal weaknesses and external threats. The major internal weakness is the design, which allows users to post only short questions. The interaction design deters educators from adopting *HiNative* for the purpose of encouraging learners to receive native speaker feedback on longer compositions or speech. In addition, a template for requesting language corrections is available only to the premium users. Therefore, learners who want to receive native speaker corrections need to either purchase the premium edition or use alternative applications. Another weakness is the absence of a social networking function with native speakers. To engage learners with interactions with native speakers, educators need to adopt alternative platforms such as *HelloTalk* and *Speaky*.

Finally, language learning on *HiNative* is also affected by external threats. The most significant external threat is feedback provided by the native speaker members. The response speed and amount of feedback depend on the availability of native speakers willing to answer the question. The quality of feedback is also influenced by their linguistic knowledge and ability to explain the answer clearly. To mitigate the drawback, educators can suggest that learners post their questions again, but by paraphrasing them. It is also useful to explore further the language usage and cultural practices by using the previously mentioned alternative platforms for languages learners as well as websites for a general audience.

Implications for teaching

HiNative provides a limited capacity, asking only short questions. Despite this limitation, the application can be used to achieve multiple teaching goals in language classrooms at tertiary level. Given the asynchronous interaction design, *HiNative* can be adopted as a platform to complete homework by asking the native speakers short questions.

First of all, *HiNative* is useful for engaging learners in a wide range of learning activities – namely requesting native speakers to 1) explain the meaning and usage of an expression

learners cannot find in dictionaries; 2) provide language corrections for a few sentences; 3) explain a situational language usage; 4) share cultural practices; and 4) provide their opinions for a topic. With globalisation of the business sector, universities have increasingly regarded developing students' inter-cultural competency as one of their urgent missions (Newton, 2016). *HiNative* can serve as a useful pedagogical tool to develop learners' inter-cultural competency, particularly in a foreign language learning context where they cannot access native speakers easily. For teaching purposes, educators can provide homework requiring learners to ask native speakers culture- and language-related questions using *HiNative*; such as 1) 'How do they behave..?' or 'How do they say..?' under a specific communication context; and 2) 'How do they interpret..?' given utterances and behaviour under the specific context. As follow-up classroom activities, educators can ask learners to 1) compare the similarity and differences between perspectives and cultural practices of themselves and the ones of the native speakers; and 2) discuss how they can interpret and perform appropriately both in their own culture and others. Needless to say, to help them to work on the assignments confidently, it is essential to provide hands-on class activities prior to issuing the assignment, so as to familiarise students with the online platform.

Secondly, integrating *HiNative* into a language curriculum allows educators to achieve what McLoughlin and Lee (2008) refer to as 'Pedagogy 2.0'. The aim of this pedagogy is to move learners beyond a teacher-centred classroom learning environment by encouraging them to *"exploit more fully the affordances and potential for connectivity enabled by Web 2.0 and social software tools"* (*op.cit.*, p.15). The authors assert that educators can achieve this goal by adopting the following approaches to assist language learners: to 1) participate in online communities for language learning; 2) make decisions about their own learning to construct a personalised learning environment; and 3) produce their own ideas and knowledge. By embedding the use of *HiNative* into the language curriculum, educators can promote language learning beyond the classroom by assisting users to participate in online language learning communities. Use of the online platform encourages learners to construct, by means of the affordances of the technology, personalised learning spaces – by choosing what to learn, when to learn and how to learn. Finally, this pedagogical approach enables learners to contribute to other online community members by sharing their expert knowledge as native speakers.

Finally, educators can adopt *HiNative* in order to expand learners' repertoire of out-of-class language learning activities. Lai's (2015) study found that language learners often integrate resources used in classrooms into self-directed language-learning contexts. The findings also showed that language learners prefer to use less time-demanding online resources. *HiNative* is a platform enabling language learners to engage in learning using small chunks of time. Given the empirical findings discussed above and learning design of *HiNative,* the integration of *HiNative* into language classrooms may motivate learners to adopt online platforms for self-regulated language learning.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the features of *HiNative* and the pedagogical implications of its use in the classroom. *HiNative* is a question and answer application, promoting the users' language

and culture learning by asking short questions to native speaker members. Despite its limited capability to ask only short questions, the application can be adopted in language programmes to engage learners in a wide range of learning activities, including the ones to develop their inter-cultural competency. Use of this application will be particularly useful to encourage busy learners to use their target languages using their downtime. It can be beneficial for learners who do not have native speaker friends to access native speakers' knowledge quickly and easily. Integrating online platforms such as *HiNative* into language programmes provides learners with first-hand experiences of affordances provided by Web 2.0 technology for language learning. Consequently, it may motivate them to act on the affordances to expand opportunities for out-of-class learning.

Acknowledgement

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