

Technology Reviews

Software review: Meetup

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Introduction

Meetup (<https://www.meetup.com/apps/>)¹ is an online platform designed to get people to share similar interests and to enjoy social activities with other members offline. Users have access to a wide range of Meetup events that they may wish to participate in, according to their personal interests, date and time availability and location. Although Meetup has been developed for general users, language learners can adopt the application for the purpose of language learning, creating face-to-face interactions with native speakers and proficient users of the languages (also referred to below as native speakers). Access to such opportunities is not always easy for learners studying the target language either in their home country or in a host country (Allen, 2010; Kim, 2011). For example, learners of Japanese who are based in the UK may have few opportunities to converse in Japanese. Even learners of English who are based in the UK may lack opportunities to practise English outside their classroom. However, learners can break down the access barrier by using Meetup for language learning – namely, to identify and participate in social events providing learners with naturally occurring interactions with native speakers. By participating in these events, language learners can meet native speakers sharing similar hobbies. The social setting provides learners with exposure to the target languages and to opportunities to communicate, using the target language, what they feel passionate about.

Evaluation

Technological features

Meetup provides both web- and mobile-based platforms. Image 1 shows the Meetup homepage on the web-based platform. To familiarise first-time users with the application, Meetup provides a self-introduction video on the home page (see image 1). Users can also learn more about the platform by accessing the 'Help' link located at the bottom of the home page. Meetup's mobile application can be easily installed from either Google Play (Android) or the App Store (iPhone). The application requires devices with the 5.0 operating system (or later) for Android, and the iOS 12.0 (or later) for iPhone.

¹ This paper is written based on information available by July 8, 2020.

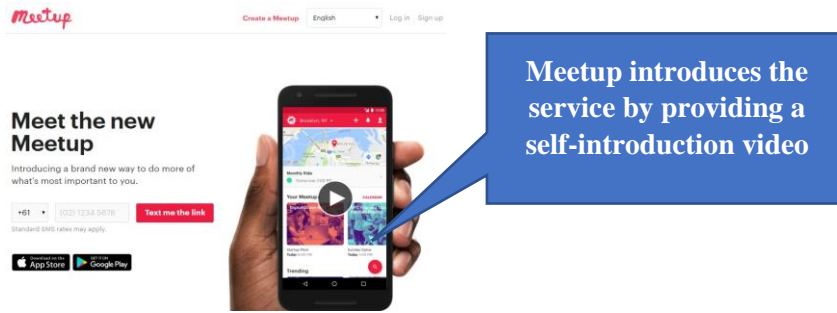


Image 1: Meetup homepage (web-based platform)

Signing up to Meetup and navigating the platform are easy. Once the application has been installed to a smartphone, Meetup prompts users to choose from the categories according to their interests. After the user has selected a category, Meetup provides details of the relevant groups according to their interests and location. Users may then choose which groups they wish to join. Following completion of this procedure, the application prompts the user to sign up using an existing Facebook/Google account or e-mail address.

Users can easily explore the Meetup events they wish to participate in according to their interests, date and time availability and location, either from the home page or by clicking the 'Explore' icon on the home page. Once logged on, Meetup prompts users to choose the date of an event in which they may wish to participate. After selecting the date, Meetup provides the details of several events organised by the groups the user has joined (see image 2). Users may also, however, explore the Meetup events organised by other groups by clicking the 'Explore' icon (see image 2). Clicking each event page provides users with a description of the event, the time and date and the location. To participate in the event, users click the tick (✓) symbol on the event page (see image 3).

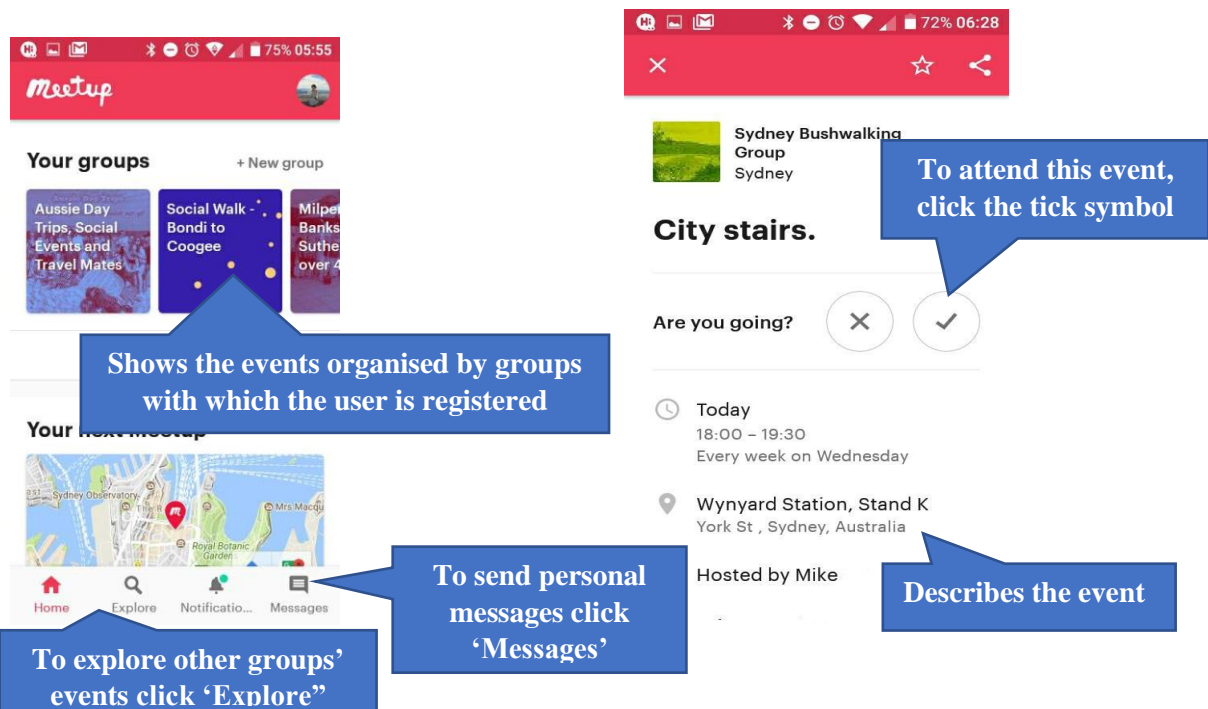


Image 2. Showing events by my groups

Image 3. An event page

Users can communicate with the event organiser or other participants by posting a message in the event page (see image 4) or by sending a personal message to the members attending the event by clicking on their picture (see Image 4). The platform then opens the page for sending a personal message.

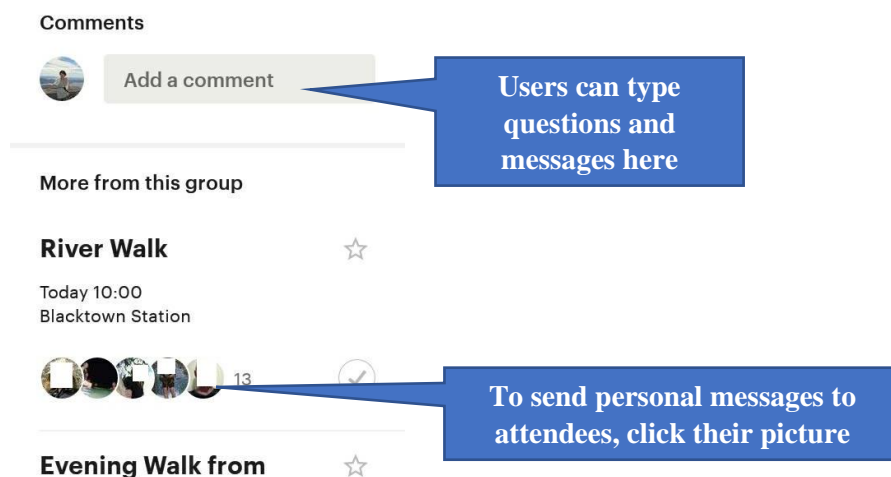


Image 4. Communicating with other members

Pedagogical Features

Participation in face-to-face interactions with native speakers provides learners with favourable conditions for language learning, namely: 1) observing how the target language is used by the speakers; and 2) practising the language in naturally occurring settings. Despite the benefits, access to such opportunities is not necessarily easy for learners who do not have native speaker friends in the immediate learning environment. As a strategy to break down the access barrier and to create opportunities for language learning, language educators may suggest to adult learners that they use Meetup for language learning. That is, to identify and participate in Meetup events where they can mingle with native speakers. Meetup encourages learners to interact with native speaker members comfortably and confidently by providing native speaker interlocutors who share similar interests and social contexts to discuss topics about which they feel passionate. Users can search for those with a shared interest or for others who are learning the same language and based in the same area. Except for specifically designed language-exchange meet-ups, the Meetup group activities do not provide specific language-learning activities or focus on language corrections for learners. Meetup does, however, provide a social context where learners can communicate with native speakers spontaneously, using the target language while enjoying activities together. Language interactions in classrooms are often controlled by teachers and learners have limited opportunities to construct the discourse (Strobelberger, 2012). On the other hand, the naturally occurring language interactions during Meetup events allow learners to co-construct their interactions with native speakers by choosing the topic they wish to discuss and how they interact with the speakers. Given the nature of the interactions with the native speakers in Meetup events, regular participation at such events may help to

develop learners' speaking and listening proficiencies as well as their pragmatic and intercultural competencies.

Teacher Fit (approach)

Language learning via Meetup events is best described by sociocultural theory – namely, that learning is mediated by use of cultural tools and interactions with more capable members. Scaffolding provided by more experienced members enables a novice to achieve what s/he cannot do alone (Lantolf, 2000). Meetup is a cultural tool designed to bring together, with an enjoyable social dynamic, people who share similar interests. In terms of Meetup's application in a language learning context, it promotes language learning by connecting learners (novices) to naturally occurring interactions with native speakers (experts) sharing similar interests. Participations in the events may provide learners with the opportunity to observe how native speakers use the language in an authentic social context. Native speakers, as experts of the languages, may also support language learning by providing multiple forms of scaffoldings to language learners including: 1) requesting that they reformulate their utterances so that their comments may be better understood; and 2) providing language learners with expressions they know but which they cannot construct by themselves. Thus, multiple forms of scaffolding mediated by Meetup enable learners to use and learn target languages in ways they cannot otherwise achieve without using the application. Despite the benefits for language learning, it is difficult for some learners to locate such useful online resources as Meetup to use for language learning (Lai, 2015; Lai and Gu, 2011). To encourage language learners to use the target language outside the classroom, it is important to expand their repertoire and use of online resources. Recommending the use of Meetup to language learners is one pedagogical strategy for increasing their access to naturally occurring interactions with the native speakers. However, meeting strangers for language learning is not risk free. Since some Meetup members do use the application for inappropriate purposes, educators should remind learners to use the application carefully and to meet its members only in public places.

Learner Fit (design)

Meetup is appropriate for intermediate- or advanced-level learners who want to have face-to-face interactions with native speakers, but who cannot access such opportunities easily in their immediate learning environment. In particular, this application is suitable for sociable learners who are willing to meet new native speaker members sharing similar interests to enjoy social activities together. The social context provides a shared setting to discuss and perform the language during the activities. Consequently, Meetup encourages learners to communicate, using the target languages with native speakers, what they feel passionate about. Thus, language learners can use Meetup to break down the barrier to accessing native-speaker interactions as well as to construct highly personalised learning spaces.

Despite the discussed benefits, the Meetup platform is not useful for every learner. First, owing to their limited language skills, learners with low language proficiency may find it intimidating to participate in conversations with native speakers at Meetup events not focused on language learning. Intermediate or advanced language proficiency levels are therefore a prerequisite for understanding and participating in naturally occurring interactions with native speakers. However, those learners with low language proficiency may feel comfortable participating in Meetup events organised to promote learning language and culture. These events are more likely to be attended by language learners of a similar

proficiency level and the native speaker attendees may speak both their first and target languages for them. Second, language learning in Meetup requires learners to be willing to learn the target language by socialising with native speakers. Opportunities for language learning in Meetup arise while learners socialise with native speakers using the target language. However, shy learners may feel intimidated or uncomfortable about interacting with native speakers whom they have met for the first time at the event. Third, those learners who prefer to learn the target language by receiving corrective feedback may not feel motivated to use the application, as the native speaker participants usually do not provide such feedback at Meetup events. Some language learners expect native speakers to provide corrective feedback for their erroneous expressions, even in naturally occurring interactions (Kim, 2011). However, native speakers often prioritise flow of communication over correction of learners' linguistic errors in such communication contexts (Nagami, 2005). To motivate such learners to use Meetup for language learning, language educators can share the benefits of participating in naturally occurring interactions with native speakers for language learning. Finally, using Meetup for language learning requires learners to develop their ability as autonomous learners. Meetup does not provide a fixed learning schedule or pre-designed learning materials such as those that learners are likely to find in classroom learning contexts. To enhance efficiency of language learning using Meetup, learners must be motivated to schedule participation at Meetup events on a regular basis. They should also be able to identify what they wish to learn from interactions with native speakers at the events and actively to initiate interactions with native speakers to facilitate such learning.

Summary

Many language learners have difficulty accessing face-to-face interactions with the native speakers. Meetup can be used to overcome this constraint in that learners can easily locate and participate in social events in which they engage in face-to-face interactions with native speakers. Participation in the events enables learners to use the target languages spontaneously while enjoying shared interests with native speakers. The social setting also encourages learners to communicate, using the target languages, what they feel passionate about. Given that, Meetup can be used as a pedagogical tool to empower learners by providing access to native speaker knowledge as well as to opportunities to communicate on topics about which they feel passionate.

Acknowledgement

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