CALICO Journal
The Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium

- Home »
- Publications »
  ○ CALICO Journal »
  ○ Book Series »
  ○ Software Reviews »
    - Review Guidelines
    - Chinese
    - ESL
    - French
    - German
    - Italian
    - Japanese
    - LCTLs
    - Spanish
    - Tools
- CALICO Conference »

CALICO Software Review

Livemocha as an online language-learning community

Min Jung Jee
Min Jung Park
University of Texas at Austin

PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

Product Type	Web-based global language-learning community with online instructional content (drill and practice), peer feedback, and online chatting with community friends
Language	Languages of website: English, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, and Korean Languages for learning and teaching: English, Spanish, French, German, Mandarin Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Icelandic, Italian, Portuguese (Brazil), and Russian
Level	Self-study lesson content, beginning and intermediate levels; other activities (e.g., online chat, providing feedback for writing and speaking) open to all levels of proficiency and ages
Activities	(a) "learn," vocabulary learning, reading, listening, unscrambling words, writing, speaking, and practicing dialogues; (b) "practice," recording the dialogue with a partner, recording a script and submitting for peer review, submitting a written essay for peer review; and (c) "share" as a tutor, correcting and rating writing or speaking exercises submitted by text or audio comments

Member Login

E-mail:

Password:

Media Format	Online
Operating Systems	Windows and Macintosh
Hardware Requirements	PC 512 or more MB RAM; 200 MB or more of hard disk space; sound card; microphone, web camera Macintosh: 512 or more MB RAM; 200 MB or more of hard disk space; microphone, web camera
Supplementary Software	*Internet Explorer* 7.0+, *Firefox* 1.5+, *Flash Player* 9.0+, *Windows Media Player*
Documentation	Online video help for users
Price	Free, simply sign up

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The *Livemocha* system supports an interactive online community where the power of social networking drives the learning community (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Livemocha Homepage

Members of the online community benefit from free language lessons, membership in a diverse community, online chat, and access to motivational tools to keep the language learners on track in learning one or more languages. The *Livemocha* system is an e-learning Web 2.0 startup founded by a group of experienced and successful entrepreneurs based in the Seattle area and launched at the end of September 2007. This community is a first of its kind web-based language-learning solution integrating online instructional content with a global community of language learners. The software is available with support in 11 popular languages: English, Spanish, French, German, Mandarin Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Icelandic, Italian, Portuguese (Brazil), and Russian. It also has three key learning areas: (a) lesson content--lesson plans include over 160 hours of beginning- and intermediate-level content teaching everyday conversational language along with reading, listening, writing and speaking exercises; (b) global community--users have the option of practicing structured conversation exercises with a native speaker or submitting a writing or audio sample of an exercise for a native speaker to edit or correct in which community-based interactive tools help build an engaged language community; and (c) motivational system--*Livemocha* provides the tools to keep learners motivated to help them make steady progress through competitions, a language buddy system, and community encouragement.

EVALUATION

Technical Features

The *Livemocha* system requires learners to register, at no charge, at its website (http://www.livemocha.com).

At present, there is no lesson for which the learners are required to pay a fee. The registration sends out a 'LiveMocha Account Activation' email in which users click on the web address to activate their accounts. Users can use both Mac and PC via an internet connection, and the speed of program operation depends on the CPU capacity of the computer and the speed of the internet connection. The website works best with *Internet Explorer* 7.0+ or *Firefox* 1.5. The website is very user friendly and provides Help videos. Users can follow step-by-step explanations of the introduction to lessons, making friends, and advanced use while they are watching the computer monitor. The website also has a Demo video explaining the overall purposes of the website and language-learning activities. For the successful use of the various activities, the computer should be equipped with a sound card, graphic card, high-quality video, a sound recording system and have a high speed and secure internet connection.

Activities (Procedure)

There are four areas in this community: Home, Learn, Practice, and Share. In the Home page, learners can keep track of their progress in their enrolled language course, manage communication with their friends, and navigate through the menus.
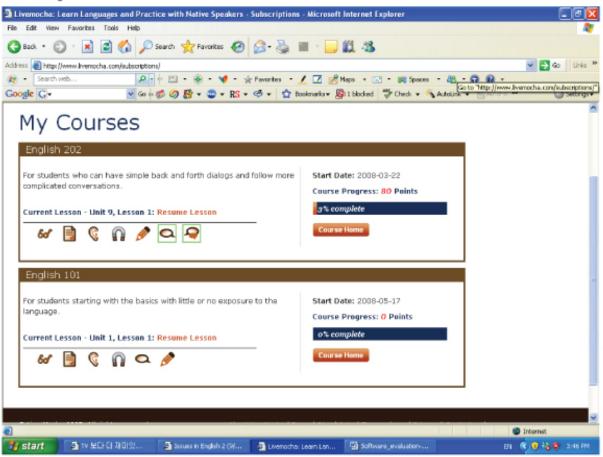
Figure 2
Main Activities

In the Learn page, learners do the exercises provided for the course of their choice (see Figure 3). There are 7 activities:

1. Learn: learners listen and click the right picture for vocabulary learning.
2. Reading: learners read the sentence and click the right picture.
3. Listening: learners listen and click the right picture.
4. Magnet: learners listen and arrange words in a correct sentence.
5. Writing: learners read the Prompt, write an essay, and submit it to receive feedback from other anonymous users or their invited friends.
6. Speaking: learners record a paragraph length discourse sample and submit it for peer review.
7. Dialogue: learners practice a paragraph-length given dialogue with a partner of their choice.

Since the community is new and there is not yet enough members to develop lessons to satisfy all levels of learners, all the lesson content aims to develop basic English skills. Therefore, it is more beneficial to beginners than advanced learners. However, the website is updated regularly in terms of difficulty; and, for writing and speaking, advanced learners can find their own teachers or colearners online who can collaborate and give appropriate feedback to develop their English skills.

Figure 3
Learn Page

In the Practice page, learners can practice dialogue, speaking, and writing by themselves (see Figure 4). They can also upload their written essay with the aid of a "phrase translator" for peer feedback, record responses to the website and receive text and audio comments, and invite a friend for dialogue practice in the voice chat program.

Figure 4
Practice Page

In the Share page, learners can look through the list of all of the submitted writing and speaking samples that they can contribute to and that tutors can correct.

Teacher Fit (Approach)
The design of *Livemocha* and its suggested activities are rooted in several SLA theoretical backgrounds, specifically sociocultural theory by Vygotsky (1978) since it promotes the sense of community language learning (Overfield, 1997), learner autonomy as a strong motivational tool (Holec, 1981), intercultural awareness (Byram, 1997), interaction-rich communication (Long, 2000), heightened attention to noticing (Schmidt, 1990), and the perspective of English as an international language (EIL) (Llurda, 2004). First of all, the essence of *Livemocha* is to help build a social network of foreign language learners from all over the world and to provide a learner community which allows users to share their language-learning process through the interaction. Its theoretical support lies in sociocultural theory which advocates that human cognitive development is highly associated with the social context; learning takes place not exclusively on the individual level but significantly involves social interaction with others, preferably with more capable ones (Vygotsky, 1978). The *Livemocha* system allows various forms of interactions within the community such as individual versus

online learning material, giving and receiving peer feedback for submitted speaking and writing samples, and free online chat (nonnative speakers-nonnative speakers [NNSs] and native speakers[NSs]-nonnative speakers), including group chat sessions hosted by a tutor.

In particular, text, audio, and video online chat with like-minded NSs or learners is available to provide benefits that have been consistently pointed out in the literature on computer-mediated communication (CMC): an opportunity to produce comprehensible output to make oneself understood (Leahy, 2004), heightened noticing of problematic language production and interactional feedback from interlocutors during chat sessions (Lai & Zhao, 2006), and ultimately increased input, output, and negotiation of meaning to facilitate the SLA (Kern, 1995). Other advantages include reduced anxiety, more communication, and greater risk taking in chat sessions (Beauvois, 1995, 1999; Kelm, 1992; Kern, 1995). The audio and video functions of the chat software add extra communication channels incorporating listening and speaking skills as well and provide nonverbal cues that are missing in text-based chat.

As mentioned above, one of the most important features of the program is appropriate feedback that corresponds to the spirit of community. The program keeps track of learners' performance in online exercises and their progress in the enrolled courses. More important, users receive asynchronous peer feedback on the speaking and writing exercises they submit, which motivates learners because they realize that their learning is valued and supported within the community. In addition, receiving feedback on the specific content helps to heighten learners' attention for noticing not only errors in their language use but also linguistic features to be learned that have not been noticed (Schmidt, 1990). Moreover, inviting others to review their work is a great opportunity for them to connect to the broader community. However, since no users are obligated to provide feedback, it is not guaranteed that learners benefit from regular feedback on their work, which can be quite frustrating to learners who are highly motivated. It must also be mentioned that the quality and accuracy of the feedback from peers with low proficiency remains questionable.

The program is also designed to enhance learner autonomy as users look for learning opportunities outside the classroom, engage in the language-learning community in a self-paced, self-accessed language course, and integrate their linguistic knowledge into their personal framework by facilitating social relations with people who have the same interest. These features contribute to the fun and motivational aspects of the design; students may even experience "flow, an optimal experience characterized by intense focus and involvement that leads to improved performance on a task" (Csikszentmihaly as cited in Egbert, 2003, p. 499). Egbert suggested that flow exists in the foreign language classroom and that students reported a higher level of flow experience while performing computer-based tasks (e.g., chat) than other tasks.

Intercultural understanding is another area to be established through the ongoing real-life conversations with cultural informants in the chat program. Making friends with NSs of the target culture can open up additional channels for intercultural communication for English language learners in an English-as-a-foreign-language context who normally do not have direct contact with NSs. However, since a particular NS of the target culture is not necessarily a representative of every aspect of the culture, leaving the users to solely depend on a certain group of NSs online might lead to a biased perception of the culture or overgeneralization of their acquired cultural knowledge from their online friends. To encourage the users to develop deeper and respectful cultural perspectives, the teacher needs to play an active role. When the reviewer registered for an English course, the tutor sent an email notice that a particular chat session was scheduled for all the students in the course. One suggestion to establish sound cultural exchanges in virtual space is that the teacher, as a cultural mediator, could open a regular group chat session to make discussion on various cultural topics more formal and useful for honing cultural perspectives.

Last but not least, *Livemocha* includes six foreign languages to learn as opposed to other English-

dominated programs. That is, learners of a given language benefit from the community and contribute to the community as a NS of another language. This approach also supports the idea that L2 learners should be considered as active language users rather than passive learners required to conform their incomplete language to those of the NS; their interlanguage is of great value in their learning process (Cook, 2005). Furthermore, users are exposed to various forms of English from around the world, which helps them to develop the perspective of EIL varieties among learners (Llurda, 2004).

Critical reflection on the program reveals some areas for improvements and further consideration for application to the classroom. Self-study language courses provide a limited amount of content which is typically targeted only at beginners. The *Livemocha* website is still in short supply of tutors and learning materials for learners of varying proficiency levels. In addition, a disparity exists between the nature of exercises focusing on what the students actually do versus the task that the exercises are intended to promote. For example, in speaking exercises, learners submit their recording as they read a given paragraph aloud and receive feedback which, by nature, focuses on the intonation and pronunciation; it does little to help spontaneous communicative skills. Listening and reading exercises are tuned to word or sentence level recognition, and practicing structured dialogues in the program does not involve negotiation of meaning (Long, 2000).
The instructional content in the system could benefit from guidance from SLA practitioners to improve its pedagogical design and offer a more systematic approach to effective learning. Even though the program grants access to innovative learning tools, such as online synchronous and asynchronous chat, voice recording, giving and receiving text and audio comments, and a multimodal chat program, poor task design (e.g. practicing drill dialogues) interferes with making the best use of its tools. Still, students will benefit from the authentic language use in a communicative context with NSs, even in the absence of a teacher's guidance.

SUMMARY

The *Livemocha* system supports a new online learning community in which people all over the world can get together to learn 11 different languages. In this community, anyone who is a NS of a language can be a teacher or facilitator for others who are beginning-level learners of the language. Moreover, learners can improve their learning autonomy and motivation by checking their progress regularly and by selecting and doing the activities whenever they desire. In addition, the special trait of this network is the international learning community, which can enhance learners' cultural awareness as a by-product of their participation. However, since there is no pressure to continue to learn, the program requires a lot of self-discipline and motivation to actually use it to learn a language. Moreover, because most of the content is designed only for beginners, there is a need for consistent and accurate content development by SLA practitioners. Nevertheless, the new concept of a learning community can serve as an alternative for those who want to learn a language while they are interacting with friends all over the world.

SCALED RATING
(1 low-5 high)
Implementation Possibilities: 3
Pedagogical Features: 3
Sociolinguistic Accuracy: 3
Use of Computer Capabilities: 4
Ease of Use: 5
Overall Evaluation: 4
Value for Money: 5

REFERENCES

Beauvois, M. H. (1995). E-talk: Attitudes and motivation in computer-assisted discussion. *Computers and the Humanities, 28*, 177-190.

Beauvois, M. H. (1999). Computer-mediated communication: Reducing anxiety and building community. In D. J. Young (Ed.), *Affect in foreign language and second language learning: A practical guide to creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere* (pp. 144-165). Boston: McGraw Hill.

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Cook, V. (2005). Basing teaching on the L2 user. In E. Llurda (Ed.), *Non-native language teachers perceptions, challenges and contributions to the profession* (pp. 47-61). New York: Springer.

Egbert, J. (2003). A study of flow theory in the foreign language classroom. *Modern Language Journal, 87*, 499-518.

Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.

Kelm, O. R. (1992). The use of synchronous computer networks in second language instruction: A preliminary report. *Foreign Language Annals, 25*, 441-454.

Kern, R. G. (1995). Restructuring classroom interaction with networked computers: Effects on quantity and characteristics of language production. *Modern Language Journal, 79*, 457-476.

Lai, C., & Zhao, Y. (2006). Noticing and text-based chat. *Language Learning & Technology, 10*(3), 102-120. Retrieved November 24, 2008, from http://llt.msu.edu/vol10num3/pdf/laizhao.pdf

Leahy, C. (2004). Observations in the computer room: L2 output and learner behavior. *ReCALL, 16*, 124-144.

Llurda, E. (2004). Non-native speaker teachers and English as an International Language. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 14*, 314-323.

Long, M. H. (2000). Second language acquisition theories. In M. Byram (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of language teaching* (pp. 527-34). London: Routledge.

Overfield, D. M. (1997). From the margins to the mainstream: Foreign language education and community-based learning. *Foreign Language Annals, 30*, 485-491.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of bigger psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds. & Trans.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Schmidt, R. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics, 11*, 129-158.

PRODUCER'S CONTACT INFORMATION
Developer/distributor:
LiveMocha, Inc
1220, 116th Ave NE, #200
Bellevue, WA 98004
Press Contact: press@livemocha.com
Partnerships Contact: partnerships@livemocha.com
Email: Support@livemocha.com
WWW: http://www.liveomcha.com

REVIEWERS' BIODATA
Min Jung Jee is a Ph.D. student in the Foreign Language Education Program at the University of Texas at Austin. She taught EFL from elementary to college levels in Korea. Her research interests are in general technology-assisted language learning and teaching and, in particular, pedagogically sound CALL task design using various technological tools, computer-supported collaborative learning and its application to ESL and EFL. Recently, she made two presentations and conducted a miniworkshop at the TESOL EV Fair 2008 in New York.

Min Jung Park is a Ph.D. student in the Foreign Language Education Program at the University of Texas at Austin. She taught EFL at the junior high and college level in Korea. Her research interests include technology-assisted language learning and teaching, CALL task design promoting collaborative learning, issues of native-speaking teachers versus nonnative-speaking-teachers, and language anxiety.

REVIEWERS' CONTACT INFORMATION
Min Jung Jee
Foreign Language Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
The University of Texas at Austin
1 University Station D6500
Austin, Texas 78712-0379
Phone: 512 653 9496
Email: mjjee@mail.utexas.edu

Min Jung Park
Foreign Language Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
The University of Texas at Austin
1 University Station D6500
Austin, Texas 78712-0379
Phone: 512 909 7226
Email: vienna9@mail.utexas.edu

The Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium
Texas State University
214 Centennial Hall
San Marcos,TX 78666

Created by Acuity Innovation