

# Engagement with Livemocha as an Informal Learning Resource - Initial Findings from a Technology University Reading Course in Central Taiwan

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**Abstract:** This study assesses whether learning style and learning strategy impact on our technology university EFL learners' degree of satisfaction, learning attitude, and other general perceptions with respect to Web 2.0 informal learning with the *Livemocha* program. A mixed method study was conducted using interviews and a questionnaire based survey. The interview results showed that writing, chatting and speaking are the most attractive functions for our EFL learners. From the survey, no significant correlation was found between learning style or strategy and attitudes to *Livemocha*. However, significant correlations were found among the four measures of attitude to and perception of *Livemocha*: participants' learning attitude, degree of satisfaction and judgment of visual design and website function. Pedagogical significance is discussed for future implementation.

**Keywords:** *Livemocha*, visual interface design, website function design, degree of satisfaction, learning attitude, learning strategy, learning style

## 1. Introduction

Among all the modalities, computer assisted language learning (CALL) has been acknowledged to have the greatest potential to accommodate diversity and enhance collaboration in language instruction settings (Keobke, 1998; Kim, 2009; Chen, 2002). Likewise, Web 2.0 continues to gain prominence as a result of the need to facilitate and promote communication and sharing among users worldwide (Gonzalez & Louis, 2008; O'Reilly 2005). Gonzalez & Louis (2008) further elaborate that 'Negotiation of meaning is a must for language learning to take place, and this is the only possibility when there is interaction through real communication' (p. 29). However, such claims need to be assessed for our context. Specifically, we need to consider how these resources can be effectively integrated into the language learning experience of Taiwanese technology students. For these reasons as teacher-researcher, we undertook the present research investigating our students' perceptions of *Livemocha* Web 2.0 resources in their own context.

The *Livemocha* system supports an interactive online community driven by the power of social networking. This community was the first of its kind: a web-based language learning solution integrating online instructional content with a global community of

language learners (Liaw, 2011). *Livemocha* is available in thirty-eight languages in the free version and eleven languages in the paid version- English, Spanish, French, German, Mandarin Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Icelandic, Italian, Portuguese (Brazil), and Russian. Three key learning features are (a) available lesson content (b) access to a global community of learners and native speakers and, in the paid version, tutors (c) motivational benefit. The operation of *Livemocha* can be briefly described as follows.

The *Livemocha* system requires learners to register at no charge. The website is user friendly with readily accessible Help videos. *Livemocha* is organized into four pedagogical areas: Home, Learn, Practice, and Share. The lesson structure of the Learn page in the paid version, which was used in this study, consists of seven activities from which to choose: (1) Learn (2) Reading (3) Listening (4) Magnet (5) Writing (6) Speaking (7) Dialogue. On the Share page, learners can submit writing and speaking samples which tutors can correct.

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 interaction. In conformity with socio-cultural learning theories, *Livemocha* is predicated on the assumption that human cognitive development is highly associated with the social context; learning takes place not only on the individual level but significantly involves social interaction with others.

One of the most important features of the program is appropriate feedback which corresponds to the spirit of community. Receiving feedback on specific content helps to heighten learners' ability to notice not only errors in their language use but also linguistic features to be learned that have not been noticed before. It must be mentioned however that the quality and accuracy of the feedback from peers with low proficiency remains questionable.

The program is 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-access language course, and integrate their linguistic knowledge into their personal framework facilitated by social relations with people who share the same interest.

Intercultural understanding is another area to be established through the ongoing real life conversations with informants from other countries in the chat program. Making friends with native members of the target culture can open up additional channels for intercultural communication for English language learners in English as a foreign language context who normally do not have direct contact with native speakers.

Learners of a given language benefit from the community and contribute to the community as native speakers of another language. This approach supports the idea that L2 learners should be considered as active language users rather than passive learners and that their interlanguage is of great value in their learning process, rather than a faulty version of the target language.

The *Livemocha* website is still in short supply of tutors and learning materials for learners of varying proficiency levels. A disparity also exists between the nature of the exercises with respect to what the students actually do versus the skill that the exercises are supposed to promote.

Learners can improve their learning autonomy and motivation by checking their progress regularly and by selecting and doing the activities whenever they desire. The new concept of a learning community can serve as an alternative approach for those who want to learn a language while they are interacting with friends all over the world.

## 2. Research Questions

1. What is the general perception and liking that our EFL learners have of *Livemocha* website learning?
2. Is there any correlation between the EFL learners' satisfaction with the program and attitude to learning with it and their judgment of the visual interface design and website function design of it?
3. Is there any correlation between our EFL learners' individual learning style and learning strategy on the one hand and their survey responses concerning visual interface design, website function design, degree of satisfaction, and learning attitude on the other?

### **3. Methodology**

Thirty free Active English *Livemocha* accounts were provided by a professor in a national university in Central Taiwan. After a brief orientation, students volunteered to participate in a trial period of use of the *Livemocha* program. An agreement form was signed with individual participants giving their permission to access their accounts and practice records for research purposes. *Livemocha* served as informal learning outside class time.

#### *3.1 Participants*

Thirteen day-school Taiwanese English major sophomore students volunteered to participate in the six month *Livemocha* trial. They attended a required associated course entitled Advanced Reading and Discussion in a Technology University in Central Taiwan.

#### *3.2 Instruments*

A learning strategy survey (Yang, 1992; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Oxford, 1990; Yang, 1999), learning style survey (Reid, 1995), were used together with a *Livemocha* survey targeting visual design (Chen, 2007), website function (Chen, 2007), degree of learning satisfaction (Shi, 2003; Huang, 2000; Wu & Chan, 1992; Chen, 2004; Feng, 2004; Chen, 2003), and learning attitude (Lin, 2003).

#### *3.3 Procedure*

The *Livemocha* trial was launched in September 2011 and lasted for six months in conjunction with the Advanced Reading and Discussion course, as an informal learning resource. Initially four tutor sessions introducing *Livemocha* were provided in the self-access learning centre to ensure a smooth start for those who volunteered. The instructor reserved ten accounts each for elementary, intermediate and advanced level students. Seventeen students volunteered for the *Livemocha* trial, but within the first four weeks, four students decided to drop out, so a total of thirteen students completed the trial. Students were encouraged to explore the functions of the *Livemocha* program at their own pace and provide their learning logs for instructor's and researcher's reference. At the end of the trial, two interviews and the questionnaire survey were conducted to investigate our EFL learners' perception of various aspects of the *Livemocha* program. Learning style and learning strategy surveys were also administered afterwards in order to gauge whether individual variation can be accommodated by *Livemocha* learning.

### **4. Results and Conclusion**

In answer to the first research question, writing, chatting and speaking were the most attractive functions for our EFL learners. In answer to the second research question, learning attitude is significantly correlated with visual design and website function ( $p < 0.01$ ), degree of satisfaction is significantly correlated with visual design ( $p < 0.01$ ), website function ( $p < 0.05$ ) and learning attitude ( $p < 0.01$ ). In answer to the third question, no significant correlation was found between learning style or learning strategy and the measures of perception of and attitude to *Livemocha*.

The fact that attitudes to *Livemocha* do not correlate with learning strategy and learning style appears to suggest that the program equally suits all types of student. This is a major advantage since we would not want Web 2.0 CALL only to be attractive to students with certain styles or strategies for learning. On the other hand the fact that learning attitudes and degree of satisfaction both significantly correlated with website function and visual design suggests that the latter are critical for the success of any program such as *Livemocha*. Future study should further explore all these variables in order to enable teachers and web designers to optimize learning results and achievements.

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