7 Informal Social Networking Sites for Language Learning: Insights into Autonomy Stances

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Introduction

Research on learner autonomy, from Holec's inaugural studies ([1979] 1981) onwards, has focused mainly on formal learning settings, with little attention paid to informal ones, understood as out-of-class, self-organized learning contexts that encompass interaction with both target language media and a community of users of the language (Sockett, 2013). Recently, studies on technology-enhanced informal learning have emerged, such as those by Chik (2011 and 2014). Chik explores practices of autonomy development in learner driven, informal settings and adopts a sociocultural approach for analysis of the relation between the socio-digital environment and personal and social worlds. This approach is chosen for this study as it addresses learner autonomy in its social dimension, namely through the role of peers in supporting each other in learning and autonomy development, situated in its social networking and gaming environment.

The chapter seeks to identify stances in relation to learner autonomy. Stance is defined as 'one's attitude, belief or disposition towards a particular context, person or experience. Stance is not just a matter of attitude; it encompasses (…) our perceptions of (…) peers and learning situations' (Savin-Baden, 2007, pp. 16–17). The objectives of this chapter are in line with this definition since we regard stances as being constructed in interaction with the socio-technical environment and reflecting a 'savoir-être,'

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a position towards the self and other (Ware & Kramsch, 2005). The extent to which learners adopt a more individual or more social learner autonomy stance, or both equally, will be analyzed by means of two indicators: exercises and corrections.

We begin with a literature review on autonomy and social networking/gaming in learning contexts. Next, we briefly describe the context of investigation, the learning environment, the participants, and the data collection tools. Then come the Results, divided between the three research questions, and we then discuss our findings and highlight our main conclusions.

Literature Review

Socially Constructed Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy, defined as the ability of learners to take charge of their own learning (Holec, [1979] 1981), is often situated in a broader social context that stimulates its development. There are numerous socioconstructivist studies of learner autonomy which see its development as a result of the interplay between social and reflective processes (Little, 2003; Barbot & Camatarri, 1999; Lee, 2011 and 2016). Developments in digital and Web 2.0 technologies, and the opportunities for informal language learning that they afford, further emphasize social agency in the development of learner autonomy (Chik, 2014). Informal learning contexts can be considered as arenas in which learner autonomy becomes even more essential, as it involves the least amount of teacher support and less scaffolding than regular language instruction. In a tandem study, which took place outside the classroom with no teacher presence, Akiyama (2015) reports that learners developed learner autonomy, along with social skills, by developing and sustaining a network of friends, *on their own initiative* (p. 160, our emphasis).

With regard to peer learning situations, several scholars deal with group autonomy understood as 'the autonomy of the groups to which the individuals belong, such as institutions' (Murase, 2015, p. 45). In these studies a group corresponds to a clearly identified set of learners, for example, students attending an online formal course in studies by Lewis (2014) and Mangenot and Nissen (2006). By contrast, in informal SNSLL, the concept of group is 'porous' due not only to the nature of social networking (cf. strong/weak ties, cf. Donath & boyd, 2004) but also to the informal character of learning in an SNSLL, which make the term 'group' inappropriate in the case of our study. Therefore, the terms individual and social (instead of group) autonomy stances will be adopted.

Continuing in the field of peer language learning, as analyzed here, several studies have explored its potential for the development of learner autonomy. For instance, tandem learning (Little, Ushioda, Appel, Moran, O'Rourke & Schwienhorst, 1999; Mullen, Appel & Shanklin, 2009) is built around two fundamental principles, autonomy and reciprocity, both located on the individual and social strands. While it is natural for reciprocity to be grounded on the social strand, this also applies to autonomy, as 'tandem partners explicitly accept responsibility for their own learning *but also (via the principle of reciprocity) for supporting their partner's learning*' (Little et al., 1999, p. 1–2, our emphasis). Peer learners are considered responsible for other peers' learning and building of autonomy, as 'learners' capacity for autonomous learning behavior develops gradually under the guidance of teachers and/or advisers' (p. 1).

In this chapter we adopt Little et al.'s (1999) definition as it offers a different conceptualization of autonomy compared to others that situate autonomy more on the individual strand. Lewis makes a strong case in favor of a complex view of autonomy, by emphasizing the interplay of individual and group driven behaviors for the development of autonomy. In the author's terms, 'autonomous learners in social settings are capable of shifting between individually-driven and group-driven behaviors, according to their perceived effectiveness' (Lewis, 2014, p. 39). The 'accountability' of peers in the development of other learners' autonomy and the implications of the interplay of individual/social strands will be further examined in light of the data analysis.

Social Networking and Game Mechanics

Social network sites (SNS), are 'online environments in which people create a self-descriptive profile and then make links to other people they know on the site, creating a network of personal connections (…). Their network of connections is displayed as an integral piece of their self-representation' (Donath and boyd, 2004, p. 72). A publicly displayed profile is the space combining user customized elements (self-representation items) with social footprints, namely a users' network, reputation, and recognition signs gained through social activity in the SNS. The meaning of the public display of connections and achievements will be examined in relation to our Results.

SNSLL (Lamy & Zourou, 2013; Liu et al., 2015) are SNS designed to afford language learning, and have been explored from various research angles, although learner autonomy has not been analyzed so far (Harrison

& Thomas, 2009; Liu et al., 2013 and 2015; Loiseau, Potolia & Zourou, 2011; Potolia & Zourou, 2013; Stevenson & Liu, 2010; Zourou & Loiseau, 2013). SNSLL have similarities with the previously mentioned definitions of SNS, as users are able to form social network ties and to create self-descriptive profiles which contain individual (L2 progress) and also social achievements.

Individual activity and social activity are both fundamental to learning in the community. Yet, user activity can be incentivized through the design of social networking and gaming affordances (Gibson, 1979). In CALL research, Zourou and Lamy (2013) have critically addressed the design approach of triggering individual and social activity implemented by Busuu and other communities, through types of social network and game mechanics (points, stars, badges, etc.), often built on each other, and resulting in different types of reward (access to otherwise paid learning content, increased visibility as a community member, etc.). The authors argued that in some communities, peer correction, as an essentially social activity, was adapted in such a way as to occupy a central role in a user activity through sophisticated social reputation mechanics, although correcting in one's L1 is far from being the main objective of L2 learning communities.

The role of social networking and gaming features affecting learner behaviors is important for the choice of the community under scrutiny. For the purposes of this study, we have deliberately chosen Busuu, whose design of social networking and game mechanics promotes individual and social activity almost equally, as shown by Lamy & Zourou (2013). In other words, the game design elements of this community, by privileging neither more social nor more individual behavior, afford an unbiased analysis of the individual and social strands of activity in relation to learner autonomy.

In creating and maintaining social networks, we claim that users are agents shaping their own and other users' activity in the community. Peer learning that happens in Busuu, and its foremost manifestation, peer correction, is, we argue, a fundamentally social, voluntary, self-initiated, and autonomous form of activity and the demonstration of social participation created and maintained by social networks. By engaging in peer correction, users clearly demonstrate social autonomy, as this is solely motivated by users' free will to support other users throughout their learning process and their requests for support. Based on the claim that autonomy is the capacity to take charge of one's learning and contribute to the development of peer learning, this chapter explores autonomy stances afforded by social networks and game mechanics in an informal SNSLL. The chapter addresses the following research questions (RQ):

1. What types of learner stances can be documented from the analysis of activity patterns and user profiles? (RQ1)
2. What is the role of social networking and gaming in the adoption of a social autonomy stance? (RQ2)
3. Do social networking and gaming features afford individual autonomy stances? If so, by what means? (RQ3)

Method

Context of Investigation

Learning and providing oral and/or written feedback in this SNSLL is a voluntary, self-initiated activity. Busuu is designed to afford L2 learning that occurs on the individual and social strands. On the individual strand, learners are offered learning resources structured in learning pathways, a feature giving rise to the term 'structured Web 2.0 language learning communities' to designate Busuu and similar SNSLL (Loiseau, Potolia, & Zourou 2011; Zourou, 2012).

The main components of an individual learning strand are: completing vocabulary and grammar exercises and open tasks (written and/or oral, assessed by peers); revising vocabulary; completing a lesson (six to ten lessons per level); completing a level (A1.1 to B2.2; passing a level test. In the social strand, learners can benefit from peer oral and written correction and social interaction possibilities, through user-led discussion groups, in-house text and video chat facilities, and tools enhancing the social learning component (see the next section).

Learning exercises are a key feature of individual learning pathways, therefore for the purposes of this study the number of exercises completed serves as an indicator of the individual autonomy stance (in Busuu, exercises and tasks are both counted as exercises). In this study peer oral and/or written correction is considered as a voluntary activity that helps L2 learners to benefit from L1 feedback, therefore corrections serve as an indicator of the social autonomy stance). Numbers of exercises and corrections figure on every user profile (Figure 7.1).

The number of exercises and corrections together with the number of friends (reflecting social networking activity) and badges (displaying both learning achievements and community engagement) are publicly displayed as first level information, in the upper section of a user profile.
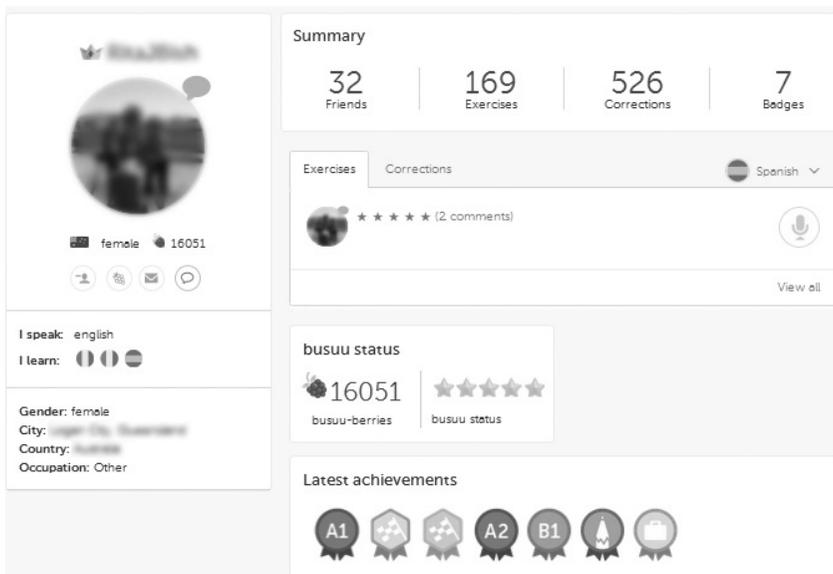
Figure 7.1. A User Profile

Social Networking and Gaming Features in Busuu

Social networking and gaming features are two sides of the same coin in Busuu as 'social networking and gaming dynamics are intertwined, with social networking serving to spread and accelerate user game activity (…) across networks of one's friends' (Zourou & Lamy, 2013, para 6). Briefly, the gaming features of Busuu are points, badges, challenges, leaderboards, stars, plus the Language garden. (A detailed analysis of social networking and game mechanics in several SNSLL was carried out in the aforementioned study.) In Busuu the activity of each member is calculated on the basis of a fairly sophisticated system that valorizes both individual and social activity. For example, points ('Busuu-berries') reward individual learning (e.g., completing an exercise or a unit) and peer learning (e.g., by correcting peers' exercises). Badges are gained by users completing a language level or a specific course (business course or travel course), and on the social strand for creating and moderating a group, commenting on X posts, receiving X thumbs up, and so on. Another game mechanic is a challenge, whereby a user poses a challenge to someone he/she knows (e.g., whether they can both complete three new units in 24 hours).

Finally, each user has a Language garden, displayed at the top of each member's page and visible to all users. The garden serves as a metaphor for individual learning progress (trees and plants grow with progress in L2,
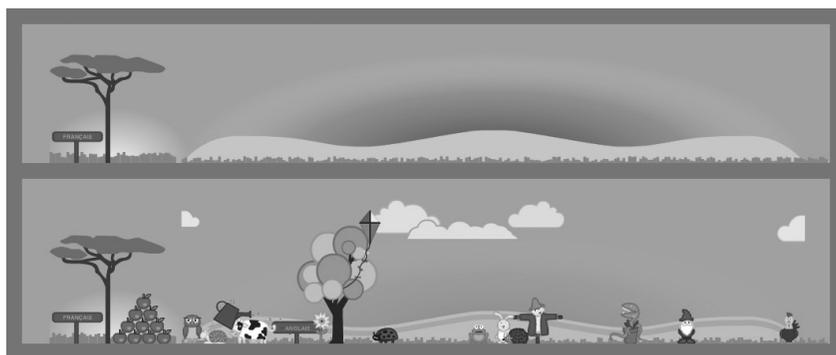
Figure 7.2. Busuu Garden, Bare (top) and Cultivated (bottom)

while insects symbolize errors in vocabulary) and for contribution to the community (for every ten exercises a user corrects, an apple is offered for his/her garden). Figure 7.2 shows a user's garden left uncultivated (top) and a cultivated garden (bottom). Moreover, gardens can also be inter-active, as this video recorded from a user's garden shows http://tiny.cc/dynamicgarden.

Participants

This section details the research design choices we made affecting the number and profile of participants (n = 1528). To start with, participants included in the study were Busuu members and had no connection to the authors. Their participation in the SNSLL did not result from an assign-ment, as part of a telecollaborative or formal learning setting (as in the cases of Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Liu et al., 2015). Moreover, participants were selected according to two criteria: a minimum degree of activity in the com-munity and native language.

First, we eliminated users with very low levels of activity. We chose to consider that users with less than 200 berries either have irregular/random activity or are fairly new to the community. This means that they are unlikely to be aware of or use all the features affording individual/social learning which were covered by the survey (see the next section). To demonstrate the amount of activity corresponding to 200 berries, Figure 7.3 gives an overview of berries gained by type of action, individual or social.

How many Busuu-berries can I earn?

Activity	Number of berries
completing a vocabulary exercise	5
completing a dialogue exercise	5
correcting another user	5
completing a recording exercise	5
completing a review exercise	10
Multimedia units (National Geographic)	10
Practice - photo/video	10
end of level test (a1.1)	1000
end of course test (a1)	1000

Figure 7.3. Earning Busuu-Berries

For similar reasons, we eliminated overly active users, namely those displaying diamonds in their profile (Figure 7.4). The 96 users belonging to this category are considered community leaders for their exceptional engagement in community life (commitment to group moderation; number of corrections judged as very useful by peers, etc.). For their overly social character, this category of users was eliminated as including them would bias the analysis.

What is my busuu status?

Your busuu status is based on the number of busuu-berries you have collected.	
If you have…	You achieve…
More than 1 000 000 busuu-berries	◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆
500 000 - 999 999 busuu-berries	◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆
200 000 - 499 999 busuu-berries	◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆
100 000 - 199 999 busuu-berries	◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆
50 000 - 99 999 busuu-berries	◆ ◆ ◆ ◆
20 000 - 49 999 busuu-berries	◆ ◆ ◆

Figure 7.4. Gaining Diamonds in Busuu

Secondly, regarding native language, we selected English- and French-speaking users only in order to assess whether native language affects user autonomy stances (see the section on Analysis of User Activity and Profiles). For a broad view of native language, we selected users from five major countries for each language, namely USA, Australia, UK, English-speaking Canada, and Ireland for English speaking users (n = 696), and France, French-speaking Canada, Switzerland, Belgium, and Luxembourg for French-speaking users (n = 832).

Regarding age, the set of users was divided into three age groups (Groups A, B, and C), corresponding to the age categories employed by Busuu. Group A represents users aged 16 to 29 (n = 409), Group B represents users aged 30 to 49 (n = 548) and Group C represents users aged 50 and over (n = 571).

Data Collection

A mixed methods approach has already been adopted in studies on learner autonomy (Collentine, 2011; Fuchs, Hauck & Müller-Hartman, 2012; Lee, 2016) and was chosen in this study with the aim 'not to replace either of [qualitative and quantitative] approaches but rather to draw from the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of both' (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie,

2004, p. 14–15). Both levels of analysis are essential as they inform and reinforce one another: the quantitative analysis raises issues which are put into perspective by the subsequent qualitative analyses. Two methodological instruments are used, i) group comparisons and cluster analysis, and ii) an online survey with closed and open-ended questions.

Regarding the statistical analysis of user profiles, three items of a user profile were collected, namely the number of friends, corrections, and exercises. All statistical information collected is dated October 1st, 2015, although data are likely to have changed since then.

The 1528 users whose profiles were screened were invited to reply to an online survey available in English (http://tiny.cc/Englishsurvey) and French (http://tiny.cc/Frenchsurvey). We were therefore able to cross-fertilize quantitative data (data analysis of user profiles and replies to the closed survey questions) with qualitative data (replies to the open-ended survey questions) for the same set of users. This allowed us to link general trends to learner autonomy stances emerging from the statistical analysis with specific practices developed by survey respondents.

With regard to the survey, its aim is twofold. First, it serves to gather quantitative data on preferred social networking and gaming features and their value for autonomous learning that could not be retrieved through group comparisons and user clustering. Second, it aims to give insights into detailed practices developed by users belonging to the entire population (n = 1528), as their username was required to complete the survey. An invitation to complete the survey was sent out by the Busuu administration team through their automated communication system. In return for their time, users were offered discount vouchers. 47 users replied to the survey, 8 in English and 39 in French. The low number of survey respondents in comparison to the entire set of users included in this study is explained by the numerous surveys Busuu users receive. According to the Busuu administration team, for the total of 1528 users invited to fill in the survey, the number of respondents is reasonable. Out of the 47 respondents we were able to locate 42, as spelling mistakes in usernames prevented us from matching all survey respondents with usernames in our statistical analysis.

Results

Analysis of User Activity and Profiles

RQ1 aims to explore learner stances, by comparing groups with regard to age and language (see the next section) and by identifying homogeneous

groups through cluster analysis (see the section on Cluster Analysis with Regard to User Profiles).

Patterns of User Activity in Terms of Age and Language

Data analysis was carried out on the number of exercises (as an indicator of individual pattern), corrections, and friends (as indicators of social pattern) for the three age groups (Table 7.1). Table 7.2 shows the same aspects for each of the three age groups according to their native language (English or French).

Table 7.1. Mean and Standard Deviations (SD) for each Age Group (A, B and C) on the Three Indicators (Exercises, Corrections and Friends)

		Exercises		Corrections		Friends	
	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Group A	409	27.55	43.55	42.13	78.00	45.88	134.00
Group B	548	33.63	46.50	80.71	235.81	27.37	54.17
Group C	571	53.38	75.06	250.30	495.62	28.22	63.71

Table 7.2. Mean and Standard Deviations (SD) for each Age Group (A, B and C) According to their Language (English and French)

		Exercises		Corrections		Friends	
	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
English							
Group A	179	26.54	38.65	46.03	84.72	65.45	181.45
Group B	270	35.69	48.93	79.32	169.96	36.15	64.88
Group C	247	47.54	64.94	273.96	520.69	33.41	75.63
Total	**696**	**37.54**	**53.57**	**139.83**	**345.06**	**42.71**	**110.75**
French							
Group A	230	28.33	47.08	39.10	72.38	30.65	76.59
Group B	278	31.64	44.01	82.05	285.92	18.85	39.47
Group C	324	57.84	81.82	232.97	476.30	24.27	52.64
Total	**832**	**40.93**	**63.58**	**128.95**	**352.22**	**24.22**	**56.87**
Total	**1528**	**39.38**	**59.24**	**133.91**	**348.91**	**32.64**	**86.18**

In terms of whether age influences the number of exercises and/or corrections one-way ANOVA showed a group effect on both exercises $F(2, 1525)$ = 27.6295, $p < .0001$ and corrections $F(2, 1525) = 56.3146$, $p < .0001$. Post-hoc analysis (Tukey HSD test) revealed that Group C (ages 50+) did significantly more exercises and corrections than the other two groups (p < .0001 on all comparisons). We obtained no significant differences between Group A (16–29) and Group B (30–49) for either exercises or corrections. One-way ANOVA also showed a group effect for friends $F(2, 1525) = 6.6484$, p < .01. Post-hoc analysis (Tukey HSD test) showed that Group A (16–29) had significantly more friends than Group B (30–49) and Group C (50+) (p < .01 in both cases). We found no difference between Groups B and C in terms of number of friends.

Regarding the influence of native language on the number of exercises and corrections, one-way ANOVA showed no group effect for exercises ($p = .27$) or corrections ($p = .54$). In other words the pattern of activity in terms of number of exercises and corrections is the same among English and French speaking users.

Summing up, for all age groups, corrections outperform exercises and this happens independently of the users' native language. Although Group A has significantly more friends than the other two groups, this does not correlate with a tendency to do more exercises or corrections. On the contrary, it is Group C, with significantly fewer friends than Group A, which does significantly more exercises and corrections than the other two groups. Given these results, learning within an online community falls clearly within the social (doing more corrections) rather than individual (doing more exercises) stance, regardless of native language and especially for older users.

Cluster Analysis with Regard to User Profiles

The purpose of the cluster analysis (K-means clustering) is to identify homogenous groups (clusters) inside the population by minimizing the intra variation and maximizing the inter variation within each cluster. In other words, this type of analysis should help us to understand who specifically among our participants invests more in social (corrections) than individual activity (exercises). We obtained three clusters (Table 7.3) using the two variables, exercises and corrections:

- Cluster 1 (n = 32): groups users performing an average of 127.5 exercises (*SD* = 148.95) and a high number of corrections (range from 1324 to 4097).
- Cluster 2 (n = 154): groups users performing an average of 117.4 exercises (*SD* = 89.71) and a significant number of corrections (range from 604 to 1997).

- Cluster 3 (n = 1342): groups users performing a number of exercises and corrections which was equally low (28.3 ±39.48) and corrections (44.2 ±57.57).

Table 7.3. Mean and Standard Deviations for each of the Three Clusters

		Exercises			Corrections	
	n	Mean	SD		Mean	SD
Cluster 1	32	127.5	148.95		2114.3	701.80
Cluster 2	154	117.4	89.71		504.3	239.05
Cluster 3	1342	28.3	39.48		44.2	57.57

One-way ANOVA showed a group effect on exercises $F(2, 1525) = 256.641$, $p < .0001$ and corrections $F(2, 1525) = 4218.40$, $p < .0001$. Post-hoc analysis (Tukey HSD test) revealed that users in Clusters 1 and 2 do not differ significantly on exercises ($p = .56$), but they perform significantly more exercises than users in Cluster 3 ($p < .001$). However, users in Cluster 1 perform significantly more corrections than users in Cluster 2 ($p = .0001$) and users in Cluster 3 ($p = .0001$). Figure 7.5 represents the users in each cluster in terms of the number of exercises and corrections they perform. Each bullet point represents one specific user.

Figure 7.5. Representation of the Users in Cluster 1 (upper left), Cluster 2 (upper right) and Cluster 3 (bottom) in Terms of the Number of Exercises and Corrections they Performed

Insights into the ANOVA results demonstrating the outperformance of corrections versus exercises are given through the cluster analysis. In Cluster 1, users do almost 17 times more corrections than exercises (Ttest, $p < .0001$). This is without considering overly socially active users, the ones displaying diamonds in their profile, excluded from the data sample (see the section on Participants, above). In Cluster 2, users perform almost four times more corrections in their L1 than they do exercises in their L2 (Ttest, $p < .0001$) and in Cluster 3, the corrections to exercises ratio is roughly 1.5. Arguably the corrections to exercises ratio for Clusters 1 and 2 is beyond any possible analogy. Nevertheless, in Cluster 3, the most populated cluster (n = 1342), corrections outperform exercises as well (Ttest, $p < .0001$).

To sum up the findings of RQ1, the ANOVA and post-hoc analysis showed patterns of activity that largely underscore peers' greater investment in corrections than in exercises. The cluster analysis helped us identify three of them, in all of which corrections outperform exercises. These results indicate the presence of a social autonomy stance, a 'savoir-être,' that is definitively focused on others, rather than on individual activity (despite differences in engagement, cf. cluster analysis). The role of social networking and gaming in the adoption of these stances will be further investigated in the next section.

Social Networking and Gaming in the Adoption of a Social Autonomy Stance

RQ2 results point to the role of social networking and gaming in adopting a social autonomy stance, and to an emblematic game mechanic of Busuu, the Language garden (see the next section).

We first analyze the degree of usefulness ('essential to my learning,' 'somewhat useful to my learning,' and 'not useful to my learning') of social networking and gaming features for learning. This corresponds to question 4 of the survey (cf. Appendix). All replies appear in Table 7.4. The 'public display of one's profile and those of peers is considered relatively useful, which tends to confirm the value of publicly articulated social networking (boyd, 2004) in this learning community. Other features show clear differences regarding their usefulness. For the leaderboard, the incentive driven feature that serves as 'weekly display of one's and one's colleagues' progress,' users are almost equally divided between the three options. The same happens with the challenges, a competition-oriented game mechanic. Finally, a similar result is seen with features valorizing 'recognition of my efforts (Busuu-berries, badges, etc.)' that belong to game mechanics. Certainly users tend to have clear but different positions on the value of

Table 7.4. Social Networking and Gaming Affordances

Busuu facilities and their value for learning	Essential	Somewhat useful	Not useful
Recognition of my efforts (through Busuu-berries, badges, etc.)	32.6%	37.2%	30.2%
Public display of my profile and other users' profiles	32.6%	41.9%	25.6%
Weekly display of my and my colleagues' progress (leaderboard)	37.2%	32.6%	30.2%
Knowing that my corrections are useful (thank you messages, likes, etc.)	41.9%	46.5%	11.6%
Knowing that my exercises will be corrected	72.1%	25.6%	2.3%
Knowing that at any moment I can be contacted via Busuu talk for an oral or text chat	32.6%	51.2%	16.3%
The challenges	32.6%	30.2%	37.2%
Email notifications to (re-) connect to your network	37.2%	39.5%	23.3%

social networking and gaming features for their learning. More insights into specific practices are needed, for example through interviews, for a better understanding of the motivations for using or not using these features.

Social networks afford peer correction and this dimension is dealt with in three survey items, all of them almost unanimously praised by users. 'Knowing that my corrections are useful (through *thank you* messages, likes, etc.)' is considered very useful, as well as 'knowing that at any moment [one] can be contacted via Busuu talk for an oral or text chat.' What is by far the feature that users consider most useful is 'knowing that my exercises will be corrected (72.1% essential; 25.6% somewhat useful).

The impact of the community proves to be crucial when it comes to peer correction, both from the reception and from the provision side. Being part of a Web 2.0 language learning community is essential for individual learning, but through a mirror effect, one's investment impacts peer learners' development as well. Progress in a community is accomplished not only through receiving corrections but also through correcting (correcting others and getting acknowledged for this support). Yet, users are more resistant to game mechanics (challenges, leaderboard, badges/berries, etc.) when asked about their usefulness for learning. It seems that not all users make

the connection between their gameful (MacGonigal, 2014) character and their potential to trigger learning activity.

The accountability towards peer learners (reflected in socially engaged profiles and importance of peer correction, cf. the section Analysis of User Activity and Profiles) coincides with Lewis' (2014) position according to which success for autonomous learners is when they continue to pursue their own individual goals, while at the same time contributing to the autonomy of others (p. 59). We claim that social interaction is a catalyst to the development of learner autonomy, which echoes Murphy (2014) arguing that positive interaction with others and their feedback on performance foster learner autonomy. This is documented in our study, as the impact of the community proves to be essential when it concerns the level of peer correction (providing and receiving peer support, chatting, etc.). Thus, the interpersonal dimension that characterizes Web 2.0, clearly constitutes one of the key elements promoting a social autonomy stance.

The Language Garden

The Language garden shown at the top of each user page (Figure 7.2) visually represents, summarizes, and serves as a metaphor for user activity on both the individual and social strands (see the section Context of Investigation). As it is an important component of a user's public profile within an SNS, it will be examined along with its gaming character in relation to learner autonomy stances. Replies to question 10 of the survey ('Busuu uses the metaphor of 'cultivating one's garden' for learning a foreign language. What does cultivating your garden mean to you?') are analyzed below.

Most users are positive/very positive about the Language garden, although eight (one in C1, one in C2 and six in C3) declare that they are not interested by this element, considered as 'a gimmick', or 'of no interest,' or a mechanism in which they do not see 'the connection' to Busuu. For another user, there is an aesthetic value: 'Making it more beautiful, constantly improving it.' For the other 34 respondents there is a causal link between the improvement of the Language garden and language learning individually and socially.

a) I think that's great. With each lesson, another flower in our garden of languages! (C2)
b) Enriching the language! I love it, it makes me think of Voltaire's *Candide*. This book makes you aware that to be happy, you must cultivate your own garden. No reward without exercise. Here it's

the same, you work on exercises to acquire knowledge and that pleases you:-) (C3)

c)   As Voltaire said 'everyone must cultivate their garden.' So basically there's the idea of doing something every day, for a garden/a language must be regularly watered. (C3)

d)   But yes it's the idea of making progress, the more progress you make the more the garden comes alive, the more at ease you are, animated and dynamic as the network. (C3)

e)   Acquiring new knowledge, making links between words, etc. (C3)

f)   Improving my breadth of knowledge and building and growing in understanding and confidence. (C3)

g)   When I see the garden at the start, it signifies that this is a language that I want to learn, and to be able to acquire it, it must be worked. That's why to have a beautiful garden, I must cultivate it. (C3)

h)   It means expanding your thoughts, improving your mind and diversifying your relationships. (C1)

These few examples demonstrate the impact of the garden metaphor on user activity. This is also the first time in the responses we find traces of some good-natured enthusiasm (exclamation marks, smileys, appreciation – 'that's great,' 'I love') and a quote, rooted in its socio-historical space – *Candide*, Voltaire's book expressing the philosophical idea of cultivating one's garden (extracts b and c), and a French saying (extract b, 'No reward without exercise').

   The Language garden is associated with the idea of the effort required to progress in L2 learning (extracts b, c, g), with the notion of 'regularity' (extracts a, c, g) and with advancement (extracts d, f, h). Most occurrences involve the individual strand. Indeed, respondents claim that the garden helps them to enrich their vocabulary (extract e), to do more exercises (extract b) to improve their knowledge and gain understanding and thus confidence (extracts b and f). On the social strand, two occurrences link cultivation of the garden to social dynamics (extracts d, h).

   Summing up, the usefulness of peer corrections according to the majority of respondents (88,4%) also explains the findings of RQ1 (peer corrections outperforming exercises), and further emphasizes autonomy stances emerging on the individual and also on the social strand (give-and-take towards peers, being available to provide feedback/chat at any moment). In addition, social network based features more directly linked to peer learning, such as the availability to be contacted for chat and the provision and reception of peer feedback, are socially motivating. Finally, the Language garden, despite its publicly displayed gameful character, doesn't appear to

affect social activity in a conscious way (Donath & boyd, 2004), with the exceptions of extracts d and h. The garden is considered as a gameful, self-referential element, deprived of its social utility.

Social Networking and Gaming Affordances for Individual Autonomy Stances

RQ3 analyzes the impact of social networking and gaming on individual autonomy stances. It also questions motivations to invest in peer correction, which is the most salient social activity a user can perform in the community (see the next section).

Regarding question 9 ('Do Busuu's networking facilities [network of friends, gift offering/receiving, reputation system, etc.] have an impact on your learning as an individual?') 16 out of 42 respondents argue that these tools do not impact on their individual learning. Negative answers vary from 'no' ('definitely not,' 'no, not at all') to the 'no' nuanced ('no, not particularly,' 'no, not really'). Out of these 16 respondents, 13 belong to Cluster 3, 3 belong to Cluster 2, none to Cluster 1, which is a reasonable finding, as users belonging to the less socially active cluster (C3) are the ones arguing that social networking possibilities offered by the community have no impact on individual learning.

It follows that respondents often consider these tools as first level and fail to perceive that beyond their playful nature, they reflect among other things users' real social investment. For instance, a C2 user argues: 'not really, what do berries actually do for me???' It is also interesting to note how users display an individualistic attitude while wishing to advance their autonomous capacities towards other learners. Indicative replies include: 'I don't enjoy this element of busuu. I prefer learning solo' (C3), 'I did not need to receive gifts and have a network of friends for my learning,' 'no [I do not use social networks], I am rather individualistic' (C3); 'In my personal case certainly not (…) because I want to improve myself for myself and do not want to shine like a lonely star in the world of Busuu' (C3), 'Not really, the important thing for me is to progress in my learning' (C2).

The remaining 26 respondents (two in C1, five in C2, and 19 in C3) generally recognize the contributions of the social network based dimension of learning. However, this recognition is mitigated in some cases, with some downplays of the social networked activity. In fact, four users distinguish the role of social networks from peer correction. These users first say that social networking has little if any impact on their learning and then they plead openly for the pleasantness, usefulness, even necessity of peer correction. What is worth mentioning is that although this question did not

concern peer correction, users felt the need to make the link between social networking and peer correction in these replies, in their view of social networking as neutral to their learning.

a) Very little. I am quite independent so I go at my own pace. However I enjoyed getting to know a few people from different countries who corrected my texts, or whose texts I corrected. (C2)
b) No, not really because Busuu is useful to me as a learning tool and I have little or no interest in it as a social network. However it's nice to know that my corrections have been useful. (C3)
c) No, not too much impact, but the corrections of some other members help a lot. (C3)
d) No, the real learning takes place when other members correct the texts we write in the language that we are trying to learn. (C3)

In the aforementioned claims, users reject the motivational and socio-affective dimension that social networks afford, as they do not appear to need them to progress in their learning. This is an interesting finding, if one considers that the social networking and gaming features of the community are designed to function as enablers of peer correction (cf. 3.1).

In the remaining 22 replies (two in C1, four in C2 and 16 in C3), the interest of these tools is openly discussed. Three users (one in C2 and two in C3) mention the motivational character of these tools ('Yes it is very motivating'), another (C2) considers them 'fun' and yet another (C3) argues that social networks encourage them to work harder ('I suppose it makes you try a bit harder'). Finally, two answers (C3) are constructed as general truths on the subject ('Rewards are motivating'; 'Yes, I think so. It is essential to maintain relations with other students and native speakers. Above all you must speak a language, not simply read or write it').

Other motivation pointed out is the socio-affective dimension of learning. In this case, users (three in C3) claim: 'Yes, it tells me that I am not alone in learning languages and gives me great motivation to learn more on your site'; 'It's a source of motivation to stay connected for longer' and 'It's always interesting to know that someone's taking care of me.' Lastly, we mention the sole case of a C1 user who, while maintaining the socio-affective dimension, also brings the cognitive dimension into play: 'Working with Busuu means belonging to a club; it means you must respect the work of others and take your own work seriously […]. Busuu has made it possible for me to meet people who have become real friends. We are going to visit them and they are coming to visit us. […]. It's fantastic!'

Correcting Others: What For?

In question 6 of the survey ('If you have more corrections than exercises on your Busuu profile, why do you spend more time correcting others than learning individually?') we address motivations for social engagement in the form of peer correction. Indicative learner replies follow:

a)   If you want to be corrected yourself, you must correct other seriously. (C1)

b)   I often do corrections because I've noticed that some correctors make mistakes. I don't like it if foreigners learning our language are learning incorrect phrases. (C2)

c)   I like to correct others, it helps me to concentrate and to consider possible ways of teaching my native language. (C3)

d)   For the pleasure of helping […]. (C3)

e)   […] I think that helping others to learn is just as motivating when you're learning as receiving help. (C3)

f)   I correct because I like it when someone corrects me… It's give and take. It's almost an obligation. (C3)

g)   Knowing the point to which correction of exercises is important, I try to make myself useful to other Busuu members who are trying to learn my language. (C3)

h)   I work harder on correcting other exercises because I am trying to do as much as possible to help people in my community to learn my language, and also to motivate them to continue learning on Busuu. (C3)

Various stances can be discerned. For instance, in extract f, a user openly positions himself in a give-and-take relation and points out the obligation, even tacit, of 'contractualizing' the belonging to the community. His position is motivated by what Lewis (2014, p. 55) calls collaboration, referring to autonomous learners who, far from the pursuit of self-interested personal objectives, deploy cooperative attitudes, and thus pursue both individual and shared goals. This stance is clearly displayed in extracts a and e (C1 and C3 respectively, thus reflecting no impact of cluster membership in learner stances). The collaborative dimension is more overt in extract a ('seriously') which goes far beyond a simple give-and-take to indicate 'the quality' of one user's commitment to another.

In extract c the impact of peer correction on one's own learning is particularly interesting. Collaboration is not situated on the level of mutual correction but affords a more detached view of one's native language with the aim of giving more help to peer learners. In this extract, it is noteworthy

that this reflective distance implicitly leads the user to move from the role of corrector/peer reviewer to the role of teacher.

Extract b displays a peer learning practice consisting of offering an additional correction to a user, on top of a correction already provided by another native speaker or advanced user, in the spirit of precision and fairness (Lewis, 2014, p. 46). Potolia & Zourou (2013) refer to this as meta-correction, which can be considered as an act of special attention paid to another learner's L2 efforts. In this particular case, extract b is a genuine example of how to behave towards others. In other responses mentioned above, it appears that altruism (Lewis 2014, p. 44) is by far the greatest motivation: the pleasure of helping others (d), being useful (g), making them eager to continue their learning (h).

To sum up, among users who recognize having made more corrections than exercises, only one puts himself in a relation of 'contract.' The others advocate being precise and fair, and demonstrate altruism, collaboration, and the desire to improve oneself to better support others.

Discussion

The study adopts an understanding of autonomy as socially constructed, by emphasizing self and peer accountability in an informal SNSLL. There are two limitations in the approach undertaken in our chapter. First, the article concentrates on one SNSLL, thus results cannot be generalized despite the fact that social networking and gaming features exist in almost all of those sites. Secondly, the sample is composed of speakers of only two languages, English and French, located in five major countries for every language. Further research with a more varied sample of users is needed to corroborate results of the current study. Finally, interview data would have offered insights into users' understanding of social network based language learning practices leading to learner autonomy. However, qualitative data resulting from the open-ended questions of the survey afforded data triangulation with inferential and descriptive statistical data. Furthermore, so far, studies on learner autonomy have relied almost exclusively on qualitative data, with few exceptions (cf. Collentine, 2011; Lee 2011 and 2016). By deliberately adopting a mixed-method approach, this study broadens the range of methodologies and extends the discussion about methodological frameworks, tools, and approaches suitable for investigating learner autonomy.

According to the findings, all users, independently of age, native language, and number of friends, are very actively engaged in feedback provision, from the users most engaged in social activity (Clusters 1 and 2) to

the least active (Cluster 3) and this reflects a social autonomy stance. This is a remarkable finding because on one side peer correction is not imposed by the learning situation (as is often the case with tandem learning, see the Conclusion), and, on the other side, it is not the result of a heavily incentivized gaming approach (see the section Social Networking and Game Mechanics). The study also shows that belonging to an informal SNSLL brings forth a vision of learning that can be summarized as follows: learning benefits the individual user (L2 learning progress) but it also means giving of oneself (and also receiving) at both the cognitive level (L2 language and its correction) and the affective level (the need to feel surrounded/supported by the community throughout learning). Social networking and gaming affordances are perceived differently in terms of their usefulness in learning (see the section Social Networking and Gaming in the Adoption of a Social Autonomy Stance), independently of the clusters to which users belong, and there is no causal relationship demonstrated for the whole population. Learning and providing peer support are vital to users; direct contact with peers through corrections, oral, and written chats are considered most useful and the social networking and gaming affordances related to these activities are considered of utmost importance. This is not always the case with all social networking and gaming mechanics though. A possible explanation is that competition-oriented game mechanics or their gameful character prevent some users from seeing their value for learning or, alternatively, a competitive attitude counteracts the collaborative attitude learners display towards peers (being useful and accountable to them). In addition, the Language garden is mainly considered by users as an incentive for individual action (although it is fuelled by individual and also social achievements), and the fact that the garden is publicly displayed does not seem to trigger a more social stance.

Social networks have a mainly motivational, thus socio-affective value: learning in a community, being supported and not left alone in one's learning, practicing a language orally instead of reading and writing, are the main reasons given by users in their explanations of the value of social networks (see the section Social Networking and Gaming Affordances for Individual Autonomy Stances. This is a clear indication of the fundamentally social character of learning in a SNSLL, fueled by social networking, and of learners' agentive, self-driven capacities to learn in informal settings. With regard to the impact of social network based community engagement (as an indicator of social autonomy stance) on individual learning, it triggers stances both at the social level (altruism, collaboration, fairness) and at the individual level (taking a step back and reflecting) (see Social Networking and Gaming Affordances for Individual

Autonomy Stances). This is further demonstrated through 'teaching one's native language' and meta-correction. They are highly meaningful from the point of view of accountability towards L2 learners and coincides with Castoriadis, for whom "respect for the autonomy of others is not enough. One must also contribute to the unfolding of their autonomy". (Castoriadis, in Lewis, 2014, p. 56).

Conclusion

Although not applicable to the whole population of the study, this chapter identified elements underscoring a social autonomy stance, as learners demonstrate acting seriously, being accountable to peers, recognizing peers' efforts in learning a foreign language, being useful, or even enjoying this pursuit. It also identified effects on individual autonomy stance, such as distance taking and reflexivity. What is more, autonomy becomes a living element. This is somehow opposed to tandem learning studies, where reciprocity and autonomy are principles that need to be fully and equally respected by tandem peers (Mullen et al., 2009; Little et al., 1999). The differences in learning contexts (formal and teacher-led for tandem learning; informal, social network based and learner-driven in our case) is, we argue, the catalyst to enabling peers to thrive in terms of autonomy, where social autonomy arises in a more natural and less directive manner than in tandem learning.

This echoes Albero (2000) according to whom autonomy development should not be the object of an order or prescription. Formal learning environments somehow failed to enhance autonomy development in a natural, learner driven, self-initiated way. This study has allowed us to identify the role of social networking and gaming in this socially supported development of autonomy, and to stress even more that being autonomous is a stance (or 'savoir-être,' Ware & Kramsch, 2005) that needs to be individually experienced in order to be socially enacted. Finally, this study calls for more research into the social foundations of learner agency in self-initiated, informal learning contexts.

Acknowledgments

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Note

1.   Email exchange of October 20, 2015.

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Appendix

The online survey is available in English (http://tiny.cc/Englishsurvey) and French (http://tiny.cc/Frenchsurvey).