

SHORT TERM SCIENTIFIC MISSION (STSM) – SCIENTIFIC REPORT

The STSM applicant submits this report for approval to the STSM coordinator

Action number: CA16105

STSM title: Existing state-of-the-art online solutions for online language learning platforms in Europe.

STSM start and end date: 01/03/2018 - 13/03/2018

Grantee name: Katerina Zourou, Ph.D.

PURPOSE OF THE STSM

1. Rationale

The landscape of online language learning has seen rapid development in recent times. It is believed there are two main reasons for this upsurge. The first, social networking, allows users to connect in unprecedented ways, such as bottom-up, user-driven ways based around the principle of affinity spaces (Gee, 2005). The second, which is related to social connectivity, is the launch of communities offering language materials in a structured way (modules, courses and levels) often for a fee or based on a freemium model, where peer learning heavily relies on social networking and gamification. While in the first case the communities are totally bottom-up and self-organised, in the second the community is set up by a company which usually pairs with a language content provider and designs the overall incentivised learning strategy, through game mechanics and networking features. This research is grounded on previous scholar research into online language learning communities and platforms (Alvarez Valencia, 2016, Potolia, Loiseau & Zourou, 2011; Chik & Ho, 2017; Fuchs, 2017, Stevenson & Liu, 2010; Zourou, Potolia & Zourou, 2017; Reinhardt, 2017).

2. Refining the scope of the STSM

The purpose of the STSM was initially defined at the STSM application stage (September 2017) and was reshaped throughout the collaboration between the grantee and the host, both online and during the onsite work of the STSM, from October 2017 to March 2018. Therefore, the initial objective is presented along with the refined one.

2.1. Initial purpose

The purpose of the STSM is to collect and critically analyse existing literature on digital language learning (LL) environments that comprise a social and/or crowdsourced component; provide a clear and concise terminological framework with regards to concomitant terms (e.g. online/web 2.0 communities, crowdsourced language learning communities) and concepts (e.g. language massive open online courses –LMOOCs-), short learning programmes (SLPs) for language learning online. Another purpose is to connect with the increasing body of literature on incentivised online language learning, informal learning, learning in digital wilds and agency and learner autonomy.

This objective was reshaped during the collaboration between the grantee and the host during preparatory videoconferences which took place between November 2017 and February 2018, plus the onsite stay at the host institution in March 2018.

2.2. Refined purpose

We set out to collect as many online LL solutions as possible in Europe, including those in lesser used languages, with the aim of making a solid inventory of design features across all communities identified.

(400 words)

DESCRIPTION OF WORK CARRIED OUT DURING THE STSM

We reached the conclusion that the initial proposal (drafted at the proposal stage in October 2017) should:

- a) Have a realistic timeframe, containing project stages and milestones in the research work;
- b) Be better connected to the WG3 topic ("user-oriented design strategies for a competitive solution), and
- c) Gather as many examples of online language learning platforms and communities as possible. This led us to design a survey that individuals in Europe would answer, offering us more insights into online solutions occurring in languages that the research team could not obtain.

Point a is dealt with in the next section, point b is already implemented and point c is a core feature of the new study.

Regarding point c, with the aim of better understanding user-oriented design strategies, we decided not to carry out a literature review (desktop research on scholar papers) of existing LL solutions, as data and results presented in scholar papers are at least two to three years older than current date. Therefore, we opted to examine the current situation, especially because online platforms develop extremely quickly, with new platforms emerging and older ones becoming outdated or even put out of service (the most salient example is Livemocha, the most active LL community two years ago with more than 10M users, now out of service due to the business reorientation of the start-up maintaining it). More importantly, existing communities go under serious design developments all the time, with new features added and older ones not being valid anymore, which affects progress in data collection and analysis from a researcher's point of view, especially when these design developments are not announced prior to their implementation.

Stages

- a) Scope of the analysis: Instead of a mere literature review (desktop research on scholar papers) we aimed to gather as many current online language learning platforms and communities as possible. This led us to design a survey communicated to the wider public, in which respondents could share with us names and URLs of communities and platforms in their language. This survey gave us more insights into online solutions occurring in languages that the research team could not obtain. This survey is accessible at <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfViQ-0TOAeQDCRjDCoeJDzEOpQtJZNs6rPYhdYdGS0xoJGOQ/viewform> 22 replies were collected between December 2017 and March 2018.
- b) Better framing the research topic. The types of online solutions we set in the proposal (cf. last paragraph of p. 1 above) were too vague. In the research (and also in the public survey) we particularly looked for communities and platforms with the following features:
 - The community or platform is permanently open (no MOOCs)
 - There is user activity taking place (peer learning, tutoring, facilitation, etc.)
 - It does not matter how many languages are offered, only one or several

- c) Designing an inventory of design features of the communities and platforms will result from the aforementioned collection. The inventory will be based on the 2013 paper by Zourou and Lamy (cf. p. 5) displaying most common design features of mainstream online LL communities and platforms.

(500 words)

DESCRIPTION OF THE MAIN RESULTS OBTAINED

1. A set of 22 replies to the online survey has been gathered until March 10, 2018.

The survey was communicated through the EnetCollect network, language teacher networks and through targeted emails to speakers of lesser used languages, to ensure a wide range of languages and solutions was included in the collection. Data will be analysed between March and June 2018. Assistance by a Master's student from the Hellenic Open University will be sought, as the grantee teaches a course on ICT-based language learning to students doing a Master's in foreign language education. The assistance will be valuable especially for languages that the grantee and the host do not speak. This person will partially assist in data verification as well. A grant to join an EnetCollect MS meeting could be a means of compensating this student.

2. A clear timeframe:
 - 2.1. Make an inventory of all design features (based on available literature review and the 2013 Zourou & Lamy paper) leading to a comprehensive list of features targeting language learning (LL) and/or user engagement (UE). Deadline: June 10.
 - 2.2. Analyse each community against this inventory. Bigger communities such as Babbel, Busuu and Duolingo will also be analysed. Deadline: August 31.
 - 2.3. Produce a graph on where a community is situated and critically analyse the degree of emphasis on LL and/or UE.
 - 2.4. Compile data and write paper. Choose whether it will be a paper at conference proceedings or a paper at journal. Regarding conference proceedings, we propose EUROCALL and CALL conferences. Deadline: January 15, 2019.

FUTURE COLLABORATIONS (if applicable)

The applicant and host would like to have the opportunity to present this project's results to scientific conferences and peer scholarly events; for example at EnetCollect meetings and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) conferences, such as annual EuroCALL or CALL conferences.

Through the EnetCollect presentations, we aim to gather feedback by experts already dealing with crowdsourcing and able to share expert views on the topic. Through the CALL conferences, we aim to promote our project results and connect them to emerging CALL topics, thus contributing to the expansion of the CALL agenda.

Finally, this collaboration can be communicated in the forthcoming introduction of a special issue of the Language Learning and Technology (LLT) journal, where the grantee acts as co-editor with Shannon Sauro.

Sauro, S. & Zourou, K. (Ed. forthcoming (2019). Computer Supported Language Learning in the Digital Wilds. Language Learning and Technology. (Impact factor 2.43, placed 14 out of 179 in Linguistics and 30 out of 230 in Education).

Indicative bibliography

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