

# **Exploring How the Use of the Social Networking Site *Busuu* Facilitates the Development of English as an International Language**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study was motivated by the emerging trend of English as an International Language (EIL) interactions in the 21st century and examines how the use of the social networking site (SNS) *Busuu* facilitates the development of EIL. The study utilized qualitative research, namely on-line, cross-cultural communications implemented within a college-level English course, and took place over the course of one semester. The study's findings reveal that previous EIL modules conceptualized for post-colonial face-to-face interactions appear to be insufficient when applied to the development process of EIL in cyberspace. Despite this general inapplicability, the dominant status of English native speakers (NSs) can still be observed in the on-line environment. Regarding the quality of the *Busuu* SNS as an EIL learning tool, both advantages and disadvantages were revealed. Furthermore, the strategies used by participants to increase their language intelligibilities are quite similar to those reported in studies of face-to-face EIL communications, with the exceptions of simplifying written texts and browsing on-line dictionaries or translators.

**KEYWORDS:** EIL, Social networking site, Development process, Language teaching

## Interaction Processes of EIL in a Language Learning SNS

English has achieved the status of a *lingua franca* due to its global dominance. According to Crystal (2003), the chief reasons for the spread of any language are the political and military power of a dominant nation and the power of a language to maintain international status. However, Crystal (2003) emphasizes unprecedented power and the use of technology as ways of quickly transporting a language medium across international borders in these modern times.

The role of technology has undergone radical changes in the last several decades. One of the most revolutionary shifts in how people experience technology is the ability to have two-way, real-time interactions via the Internet. The Internet allows users to easily cross international boundaries through virtual reality, thus expanding our idea of time and space. Furthermore, modern technology capabilities are entertaining and often irresistible. The impact of modern technology on everything from education to leisure time is immediate, often spontaneous, and widespread. The use of Internet technology has also influenced the rate at which English is spreading, as popular English language websites and entertainment outlets are readily available to an international audience. English as an international language (EIL) is increasing at a more rapid pace due to modern technology, and in turn so are the complexities related to EIL used in virtual and on-line spaces. To address the modern context of EIL, there are increasing numbers of English teachers working to integrate social networking sites (SNSs) into the cross-cultural and cross-national learning of EIL. It has become increasingly important for English teachers to understand the development process of the on-line English learning experience as opposed to previous ways people were exposed to the English language. Looking at previous studies (Kachru, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Moag, 1992; Schneider, 2007), it is apparent that a majority of previous EIL development modules were conceptualized based on researchers' face-to-face observations of physical, post-colonial regions, which are very different from the realities available via cyberspace. It therefore becomes questionable as to whether previous studies can even be applied to the virtual practices of EIL or to on-line EIL instruction.

The idea for this study was initiated by the collision of the rapid spread of EIL and the popular use of social networking (SN) tools. The study was designed to closely explore how the use of the SNS *Busuu* facilitates the development of EIL. Specifically, the research questions are as follows:

1. How does the use of the SNS *Busuu* facilitate the development of EIL? How well can the conventional EIL modules used in physical settings be applied in cyberspace?
2. What pedagogical advantages and disadvantages are evident when implementing a language learning SNS into an EIL course?

## Literature Review

This section consists of a review of studies that focus on EIL development and SNSs. The definition of EIL and EIL development modules used in physical settings are discussed. In addition, this section covers definitions and application issues of SNSs in previous studies. This review reveals that there is scant research on how the use of SNSs facilitate EIL practices and how well traditional EIL modules developed in physical settings can be applied in on-line SNSs.

### *EIL Issues*

EIL is an emerging phenomenon, as usage occasions have rapidly increased in number due to increasing cross-cultural contact in the current era of globalization and virtual connectivity. Recent discussions about EIL have garnered the attention of researchers, especially those in the field of language instruction. Specifically, there has been discussion regarding the importance of distinguishing the needs of current EIL learning from traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Hülmbauer, Böhringer, and Seidlhofer (2008) are among the researchers providing a clear distinction between English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), an interchangeable term for EIL, and EFL by indicating the different purposes of these two types of language instruction. The main purpose of traditional EFL instruction is to equip learners with the language abilities necessary to communicate with native speakers (NSs) of English. Acquiring the linguistic expressions and norms of NSs thus becomes salient in EFL teaching. On the other hand, EIL is expected to be used as a communication medium among non-native speakers (NNSs) of English. Besides the various purposes of EFL and EIL, NNSs in the international English community far outnumber NSs (Crystal, 2003, 2004; Graddol, 1997). It might be interesting to investigate whether the same phenomenon occurs on English learning SNSs.

To explore the emerging field of EIL, some researchers of applied linguistics have studied broad fundamental issues from cross-cultural and cross-national perspectives. These issues include EIL status (Crystal, 2003, 2004; Ferguson, 2009), intelligibility (Hülmbauer et al., 2008; Jenkins, 1998; Pickering, 2006), EIL teaching models (Paradowski, 2008, 2011; Pickering, 2006), communication norms (Hülmbauer et al., 2008; Nickerson, 2005; Roger Nunn, 2005; Roger Nunn, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2005), and proficiency assessment (Canagarajah, 2006). Furthermore, some EIL scholars have attempted to create a sociolinguistic framework to define new rules for EIL users. This new EIL linguistic territory is described as "communities of practice"—the speech community of EIL. Other researchers are exploring how EIL has gradually evolved to reach stable levels in various local communities.

### *The evolutionary processes of the establishment of EIL*

To depart from the traditional concept of EFL and to illustrate the emergent phenomenon of EIL, Kachru (1985) put forward an alternative classification of the English in use. He named this method of classification the "three circles model" and it includes the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle. The major impact of this model is that it helps linguistics researchers recognize that the rapid spread of English has resulted in the formation of many varieties of English, which in turn supports the legitimacy of EIL. However, Mufwene (2001) and Kirkpatrick (2007) have observed two shortcomings in Kachru's classification. Mufwene (2001)

argues that "colony" is a term that lumps different types of colonies together in the three circles model. Meanwhile, Hülmbauer et al. (2008) are concerned that this model might have underestimated the role that English plays in expanding circle countries. These two criticisms advocate for conceptualizing new modules to dig deeper into the complex details of the developmental processes of EIL in various linguistic milieus.

Scholars such as Kirkpatrick (2007), Kachru (1992), Moag (1992), and Schneider (2007) have proposed different ways to establish EIL. Of these, Schneider (2007) suggests one that conceptualizes the formation process of English as a global language in post-colonial societies. He identifies five phases, including foundation, exonormative stabilization, nativization, endonormative stabilization, and differentiation.

In the foundation phase, English is first utilized by NNSs in local areas; in the second phase, exonormative stabilization is characterized by the expansion of variety among the local NNSs. However, NSs' variety of English is still the model language for local NNSs. Schneider considers the third phase, nativization, the critical stage of EIL establishment. This phase is filled with room for variety, which allows for the co-existence of NSs' English and NNSs' English. Furthermore, in this phase, English can be reconstructed as the NNSs' version in terms of grammar and vocabulary. The fourth phase, endonormative stabilization, is characterized by the gradual acceptance of NNSs' English in education and on formal occasions. The NNSs' variety becomes the language modelled by the local people. In the last phase, a distinction forms between the English of the NNSs and the NSs. The local culture and identity of an area are clearly reflected in the local NNSs' variety.

Kirkpatrick (2007) states that the existing EIL formation modules clearly address the developmental process of EIL in postcolonial societies but neglect the new varieties of EIL in expanding circle countries, which are the areas where EIL has spread the fastest in the past decade and that differ from post-colonial countries in terms of political and socio-cultural influences. In such countries—for example, Taiwan, China, and Korea—there is no obvious collective physical settlement of NSs. The starting phase of EIL in these countries is also different than in countries that have been colonized by NSs of English.

Furthermore, previous EIL development process modules in post-colonial countries miss out on an important tool that facilitates the spread of EIL— computer-mediated communication (CMC). This includes email, video conferencing, on-line social networking, etc. In addition to the lack of initial collective settlements of English NSs, cyberspace has also created some unprecedented genres and steps in EIL development. Regarding the effects of modern technological applications on the spread of language and language instruction, the widespread impact of on-line social networking tools must be considered. Hence, it becomes critical to investigate the transformative process of SNSs vis-à-vis EIL and English language instruction.

### ***On-line social networking***

Boyd and Ellison (2010) clearly define SNSs as encompassing three features: "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and

traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211). The features of SNSs thus connect users in a spontaneous way that has hardly been achieved by any previous social tool. Yet, unlike many other on-line social tools, SNSs do not seem to be designed for people to meet other new people in a meaningful way. Some studies (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Haythornthwaite; 2005; Lam, 2004) support this viewpoint and state that the functions of on-line social networking can be more fully developed when users are allowed to connect with their own off-line social network via SNSs. This significant feature of SNSs, which is to reinforce off-line relationships, should be taken into consideration when it is employed in language-learning activities.

Besides investigating the essential features of SNSs, an increasing number of language teachers have put forth new ideas for applying SNSs to EIL learning. The main reasoning is that the language produced on SNSs is authentic and SNSs can be accessed beyond the conventional classroom and class time. In addition, SNSs lead to spontaneous, cross-cultural communication among users. The frames of time, space, and language created on SNSs are particularly suited for EIL learners, as they tend to be individuals who interact with SNSs from around the world. Several scholars (Lam, 2004; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011; Thorne & Black, 2007; Warschauer, 2001; Warschauer & Liaw, 2010) have discussed different issues related to employing SNS tools in the EIL context of transnational or international education, such as identity, linguistic similarities with face-to-face naturalistic settings, SNS communities, SNS cultures, and ways to facilitate SNS cross-cultural communications.

Lamy (2013) puts forward an interesting comparison study about students' literacy practices in two types of cyberspace, a university forum space and a Facebook group created by students. The findings of this study (Lamy, 2013) show that different functions were displayed in these two learning platforms, and the "study-related socializing" defined by Wodzici et al. (2012) in the SNS environment could be mediated in a way that is comparable to other on-line learning tools. Different sets of community practices, linguistic repertoires, and development processes of EIL might exist on SNSs and therefore need to be examined. To articulate the uniqueness of EIL practices on SNSs, this study explores the EIL practices occurring on a particular SNS for language learning called *Busuu*.

### **The current study**

The current study aims to specify which EIL practices occur on the Web 2.0 language learning site *Busuu* and the effectiveness of employing an SNS as a language learning tool in a college-level class. To that end, the current study adopted a qualitative approach. The study consists of the following.

#### ***Course***

EIL learning activities (based on a Web 2.0 learning tool) were implemented in one select college-level course titled "American Culture" at a university in central Taiwan. This was a one-semester course lasting four-and-a-half months and was designed for sophomore English majors whose English proficiency was generally categorized as intermediate to advanced, based on their English scores from the General Scholastic Ability Test and the Advanced Subjects Test (the General Scholastic Ability Test and the Advanced Subjects Test are the two types of college

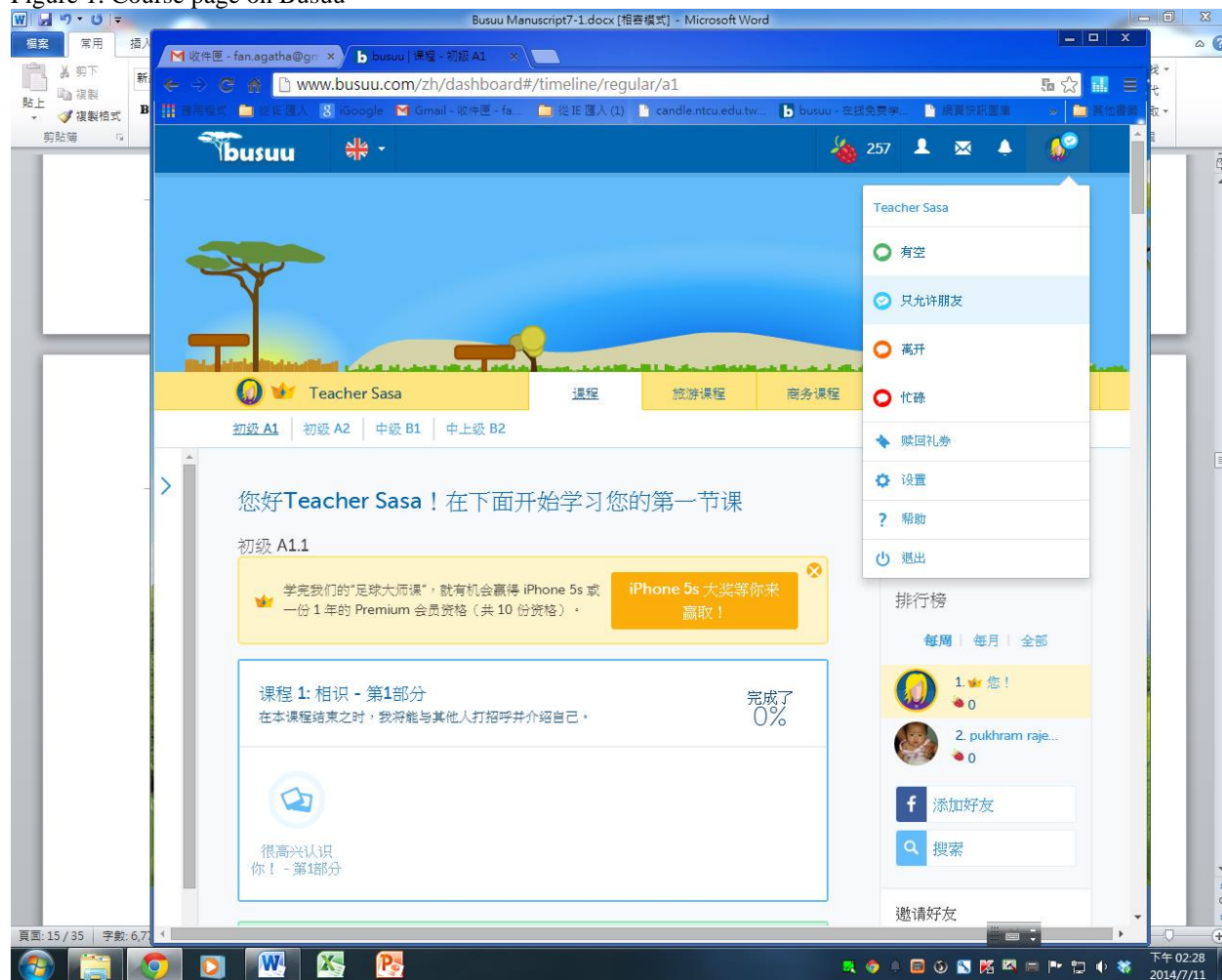
entrance exams administered in Taiwan). The course covered three main objectives: (1) to enhance students' understanding of American culture, (2) to provide students with a virtual experience of culture exchanges with NSs or NNSs of English to help them gain different perspectives on American culture, and (3) to cultivate students' critical thinking skills on issues related to American culture. The researcher was also the instructor of this class, which consisted of 32 students. The instructional language used in this course was English.

### ***Participants***

Seventeen students (out of the 32 registered for this course) volunteered to take part in the study and gave consent for their study portfolios, homework, and group reports, along with verbatim interviews, to be used and analysed for the purpose of this research. All the participants had also studied a second foreign language, such as Spanish, French, or Japanese, for one or two years prior to this course. Their proficiency in the second foreign language was mostly entry level. The cross-cultural experiences of the students varied. Fifteen of the students were educated in Taiwan, while the other two had lived in the US for more than two years before attending university. Five of the students had experience travelling to foreign countries, such as short trips to the US or France. All the students had met NSs of English in Taiwan, either through university-related cultural exchange programs or through personal contacts.

### ***The on-line EIL learning tool Busuu***

The on-line language learning tool *Busuu* (<http://www.busuu.com/>) was selected for this project because it is free, collaborative, multi-lingual, and four-skills-related. *Busuu* consists of a free SNS for foreign language learners as a platform to conduct culture/language exchange with NSs of the target language. The other functions of *Busuu* include offering structured multi-lingual lessons, covering English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Polish, Turkish, Japanese, Chinese, and Arabic, and providing access to grammar guides.

Figure 1. Course page on *Busuu*

### *Learning activities*

Participants in the study were each assigned five online communication activities to complete with their *Busuu* cohorts. The tasks included getting connected to friends on the *Busuu* SNS and engaging in on-line communications four times. These communication sessions had to be related to issues in American culture. After each on-line communication session, the students needed to turn in a summary of their communication content. All communicative practices were asked to be conducted outside of class time. The communication process could occur either in the form of text messages or concurrent voice chatting on *Busuu*. There was no limit set on the number of *Busuu* "pals" for each student.

### *Role of the researcher*

The author of this paper played the role of course instructor and was thus responsible for teaching, grading, and guiding students, as well as for completing other course-related work. On the other hand, the author needed to keep the reflective eye of a researcher in order to observe

the changes and responses of students' on-line EIL communications to investigate the answers to the research questions.

### *Data collection*

Data collection was conducted in a qualitative way for one entire semester. It included collecting students' activity records on *Busuu*, conducting 20-minute interviews with every participating student at the end of the course, and reviewing students' self-report journals. The data sources include the participating students' study portfolios, individual homework, briefings of group discussions, self-report journals, and verbatim interviews. The teacher's logs kept by the instructor/researcher after every class meeting served as triangulation documents.

### *Data analysis*

All the interviews were transcribed into a textual format. Data were categorized in themes regarding two main categories: on-line EIL development and language learners' relationships with *Busuu*. After all relevant data were assigned to the two main categories, data were re-examined and divided into emerging sub-themes, such as the contacts of on-line EIL, the goals of learning English on *Busuu*, the strategies of increasing intelligibilities, the English varieties being modelled, the sense of space and time on *Busuu*, the frustrations experienced while using *Busuu*, privacy issues, and different ways of communicating. The aim of this categorization is to help answer the two research questions.

### **Findings**

The study findings reveal that previous evolving EIL modules used in post-colonial face-to-face interactions seem to be insufficient to describe the development process of on-line EIL. Despite this general inapplicability, the dominant status of English NSs can still be found in on-line EIL environments. In regard to the effectiveness of *Busuu* as an EIL learning tool, there are both advantages and disadvantages. Furthermore, the strategies used by participants to increase their language skills are quite similar to those reported in studies of face-to-face EIL communications, with the exceptions of simplifying written texts and browsing on-line dictionaries or translators. Data presented in the following section are to answer the two research questions:

1. How does the use of the SNS *Busuu* facilitate the development of EIL? How well can the conventional EIL modules used in physical settings be applied in cyberspace?
2. What pedagogical advantages and disadvantages are evident when implementing a language learning SNS into an EIL course?

In the sections of geographical background of *Busuu* pals and features of on-line EIL communications, data were analysed to answer the first research question; in the section of notions of using *Busuu* SNS, the second research questions were intended to be answered.



### *Geographical background of Busuu pals*

The results show that the locations of *Busuu* pals, as reported by the participants, were geographically diverse. With respect to native English-speaking countries, the US seems to be the main location where NS *Busuu* pals live; on the other hand, the original countries of NNS *Busuu* pals vary and include countries in Asia, Europe, and South America. The total number of NNS *Busuu* pals is 1.75 times larger than that of NS *Busuu* pals (see Table 1). The significant difference between the number of NSs and NNSs might indicate either that the *Busuu* website is perhaps more heavily used in the NNS regions or that people in NNS regions are more motivated to interact with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

**Table 1.** Nationalities of *Busuu* pals

Native English-speaking <i>Busuu</i> Pals		Non-native English-speaking <i>Busuu</i> Pals	
Country	Number	Country	Number
US	14	Brazil	5
Australia	1	China	2
Canada	1	Russia	3
		Spain	3
		Belgium	1
		Chile	1
		Colombia	1
		Egypt	1
		Guatemala	1
		Germany	1
		India	1
		Indonesia	1
		Italy	1
		Japan	1
		Mexico	1
		Turkey	1
		Venezuela	1
		Africa	1
		Middle East	1
Total	16	Total	28

### *Features of on-line EIL communications*

Kirkpatrick's evolving five-step process of EIL in post-colonial nations (foundation, exonormative stabilization, nativization, endonormative stabilization, and differentiation) did not seem to take place in the on-line EIL interactions in the current study. This might indicate that EIL might take on a different form during its development and stabilization processes on SNS platforms. Nevertheless, the dominance of English and NSs' ownership of English continues to spread in the communications taking place on *Busuu*, as frequently observed in the study.

### *The lack of initial hegemonic settlement of English*

Compared to the conventional face-to-face EIL development taking place in post-colonial regions, EIL communications on *Busuu* seem to be more bi-directional, casual (non-threatening), instant, and less hierarchical. Kirkpatrick (2007) puts forth the theory that the foundation of EIL

in post-colonial regions usually starts with a one-way collective (NS to NNS of the local language) settlement of English, which was usually regarded by the locals as an intrusion of a hegemonic language. On the contrary, EIL on SNSs is more bi-directional (invited vs. being invited), multi-lingual (NNS vs. NS or NNS vs. NNS), casual, and less intrusive. Further, the lack of the initial hegemonic settlement of English might lead to the lack of the following four steps of EIL development in the on-line milieu: exonormative stabilization, nativization, endonormative stabilization, and differentiation. Despite the less hierarchical status of NNSs and NSs found on *Busuu*, there was still a downside in terms of the equality of interlocutors in the interactions. Some of the participating students said that they were rejected by NSs more often than by NNSs during the initial period. In addition, most of the participants stated that the English used by the NSs was the language variety they would like to model and that making friends with NSs of English was their priority.

#### *Casual conversations (non-threatening)*

Student 1: *"I asked them about their daily life or classroom culture. Just chat about something in daily life."*

Student 2: *"Usually we chatted about whatever we wanted to chat [about]. The topics were usually about daily life."*

#### *Bi-directional interactions*

Student 3: *"If you use 'I have a question,' or 'May I make friends with you,' or 'How are you doing?', it will be easy to get a friend there. They will need to answer you."*

Student 4: *"I also received some chat invitations. I didn't respond to all of them."*

#### *Rejections from native speakers*

Student 5: *"I tried to add 3 people from the U.K., but none replied. I guess there must be something about racism."*

Student 6: *"I had an experience with an American girl. At first, she said 'ok' to answer my questions. But she ran away in the middle of our chat. She just disappeared. I left her another message, but she never replied. I felt Americans on *Busuu* are very cold!"*

#### *English variety modelled*

The language used by the Native English Speakers (NESs) was generally considered by the participating students as the "standard" variety that they wanted to learn. NNSs outnumbered NSs on *Busuu*, and all the participating students stated that grammatical correctness was still an important concern when using English on-line. They stated that making friends with NSs on *Busuu* was still their priority because they considered the English used by NSs as the "standard" variety. It is interesting to observe that the post-colonial mentality of preferring English as the standard is still widespread, even in cyberspace.

Student 1: *"The disadvantage of Busuu is that most of those people on Busuu SNS are non-native speakers. Our English is much [more] advanced than theirs. I don't think they can teach us any better."*

Student 2: *"I paid more attention to grammar when I was chatting with Americans. I tried to use standard and correct English. Even though they might have understood what I meant, they still kept correcting me."*

Student 3: *"I felt that they (non-native speakers of English) used weird grammar. They translated directly their native language into English. Sometimes I need to think twice about their sentences in a Spanish way. The messages might have been written in Spanish structures. So, oftentimes, I was very careful about what I typed. I would try to avoid Chinese English."*

### **Notions of using *Busuu* SNS**

With the rapid advancement and popularity of Internet-based learning tools, on-line technology is now an integral part of conducting cross-cultural exchanges or communications. In this study, the advantages and disadvantages of employing SNSs as language learning tools were indicated. Decreasing the distance between people from different global regions is found to be the main advantage of using the *Busuu* SNS for cross-cultural communications. Nevertheless, there are notable shortcomings in using *Busuu*: (1) time differences; (2) the frustration of meeting new people; and (3) privacy concerns. In order to increase clarity, participating students adopted different strategies, including code-switching, simplifying written expressions, using on-line dictionaries or translators, asking questions, and rephrasing sentences.

#### ***Sense of space on Busuu***

In terms of the sense of space on *Busuu*, most participating students revealed that using this platform did decrease the mental distance between them and their international *Busuu* pals. The compressed psychological space created via cyberspace increased the frequency, spontaneity, and convenience of on-line language and culture exchanges. The following excerpts are taken from the participating students.

Student 1: *"Well, space... I felt [that] things happening on the other side were quite vivid to me. I sense the liveliness through communications. It helped me to understand their life style."*

Student 2: *"I felt that the on-line communications really shorten the distances of both sides. No matter if we chatted about big events happening in society or trivial things in daily life, all sound like very vivid. It's good for exchanging information."*

#### ***Sense of time on Busuu***

Despite the convenience of using *Busuu* for on-line chatting, time differences in various regions still restricted on-line communications due to the availability of participants. The participating students stated that it was easier to make on-line friends with people from Australia and New

Zealand than with people from the US or UK because the former are in a time zone nearer Taiwan.

*Student 1: "We want to find some native speakers to chat with, but it is not that easy. I feel that it is not easy to meet people from America or Canada. It is easier to chat with people from Australia and New Zealand."*

*Student 2: "Once, it was already midnight here, but my Busuu pal was still very into our chat and wanted to continue. I felt very sorry if I told him honestly that I wanted to go to bed... Most people on Busuu are from countries other than Taiwan. Time differences can easily cause inconvenience of communications!"*

#### *Frustration of seeking new friends*

As pointed out by Boyd and Ellison (2010), one main purpose in using SNSs is to maintain existing friendships instead of making new friends. Our study data results are in line with this, as the mismatch between the general purpose of using an SNS to reinforce an existing social network and *Busuu* users' desire to meet new people might become an obstacle when attempting to conduct international language/culture exchange. All the participating students expressed their frustration with the initial stage of stabilizing their relationships with their international *Busuu* pals because they were strangers to one another. Examples from the interviews are as follows.

*Student 1: "I finally got a friend from Vietnam. It's so difficult to find a friend to chat with. I had spent three hours to find a friend to chat with, but no one respond to me. I first tried 'Hello!' or 'How are you?'" to initiate the conversation but none replied to me."*

*Student 2: "You need to sound very natural when you are looking for a new friend. But actually it's so difficult to get connected with a new friend. I looked up for 10 pages on the member name list and finally got connected with someone."*

*Student 3: "It took me almost 3 or 4 hours to get to know someone there."*

#### ***Privacy concerns***

Privacy concerns or the possibility of being hassled by strangers might sabotage users' sense of safety on a language learning SNS. If the SNS has not been designed with a membership screening mechanism, the potential dangers could become even more obvious. Unfortunately, *Busuu* is not equipped with any screening mechanism. There are no verification or restriction procedures to screen new users. In this study, 10 of the 17 participating students stated that they had encountered perverts on the site or experienced privacy intrusions.

*Student 1: "There are all kinds of people on Busuu. I've met several perverts."*

*Researcher: "What did they do?"*

*Student 1: "One said that he wanted to expose part of his body to me."*

Student 2: *"There was a guy. I was just having a normal chat with him and asked him 'What's your hobby?' Then he asked me back if I really wanted to know about his hobby. I thought his answer would just be a normal hobby like swimming or rafting. Then he said, 'I have something to show you, only to you.' Then he turned on his on-line cam and wanted to take off his clothes. I logged out of the chat room right away."*

### ***Strategies used to increase fluency***

To increase clarity of communication on the *Busuu* SNS, the participating students adopted strategies of code-switching, simplifying written expressions, using on-line dictionaries or translators, asking questions, and rephrasing sentences. Additionally, they generally considered text messaging as a more feasible way of communicating with on-line pals as compared to concurrent voice chatting because text messaging gave them more time to respond, select the appropriate expressions, and look for on-line resources. Communicating in the form of text messaging was the preferred mode of communication for 15 of the 17 participants because of their fears of speaking in English face-to-face and a desire to avoid making language mistakes. In addition, most of the strategies used to increase their EIL fluency are similar to those reported in studies of face-to-face EIL communications (Hülmbauer et al., 2008; Pickering, 2006), except for simplifying written expressions and using other on-line tools, such as Google Translator or on-line dictionaries.

Student 1: *"If their English was not that good as mine, I would just use simple English words. In most time, they could understand me. If they didn't understand my English, I would try a simpler way to explain it."*

Student 2: *"If I was talking to Americans, it took me longer to understand them. They used lots of slangs. I would keep asking them questions. Usually, they were happy to explain to me. At first, I thought when speaking to native speakers, I needed to use sentences with correct grammar all the time. But the real situation was different. Americans uses lots of acronyms, such as 'u' for 'you'."*

Student 3: *"One interesting thing was that one of pals used Google Translator to directly translate his words into English. He was Spanish. When I was reading his English, I felt that I was reading Spanish."*

Researcher: *"Could you understand him?"*

Student 3: *"I could. I used Spanish to communicate with him sometimes."*

Student 4: *"If I don't understand what my pal was talking about, I would try to understand him from another way. For example, I would paraphrase my pal's sentences and asked if that's what he meant. If I felt that my pal misunderstood me, I would try to use other similar words to replace them."*

Student 5: *"Text communication is easier for me, because I can have more time to search on-line information and using on-line dictionaries or Google Translator to find the right English words."*

Student 6: "I tried hard to make him understand me. If I couldn't find a right word to explain myself, I used on-line dictionary."

### **Pedagogical implications**

Recent advancements in technology, especially Web 2.0 tools, have increased the opportunities for EIL-based interactions. The convenience and spontaneity of SNS platforms in particular have enhanced cross-cultural communications and language learning opportunities. However, there are still questions regarding whether an SNS can serve as a platform for valuable EIL learning. The benefits of SNS include the on-line development process of EIL, which seems to be more diverse, allow equal opportunity, and is less intrusive than face-to-face EIL interactions. To build on these benefits, the following things are necessary. First, the instructional activities of language teaching should be designed around the on-line development process, and on-line learners should be educated to view the NSs and NNSs as having equal ownership of English. The issue of empowering NNSs should be highlighted in EIL teaching. Second, EIL courses that adopt SNSs should be designed around the time frames that are feasible to both the local students and the targeted pals, especially when the interacting partners are located in different hemispheres. Third, on-line trolls seem to be a significant risk to students' privacy, which is something that cannot be ignored if an SNS tool is adopted as an instructional tool for EIL. To address this concern, screening mechanisms should be built into any SNS platform. Finally, the strategies used to increase the clarity and fluency of on-line EIL communications seem to be quite similar to those used in face-to-face communications. Therefore, the traditional strategies of cross-cultural communication still need to be covered in language instruction. Additionally, students' digital literacy should be enhanced by an explicit review of the acronyms or emoticons of English and the use of instructional language and culture websites to help students build their on-line EIL communication skills.

### **Conclusion**

For better mastery and instruction of EIL in the digital era, we suggest two research directions based on the results of the current study. First, as the study findings indicate that the EIL modules used in the post-colonial era are not quite applicable to the evolution of on-line EIL, there is a need to develop on-line EIL on a longitudinal scale to address current linguistic transformations and status changes. On the other hand, because of the emergence of on-line application tools, there is a pressing need to explore the different features of individual application tools so that a better integration of current on-line application tools can be implemented in EIL instruction.

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