Creating Virtual Learning Communities for Situated Language Learning Using Skype

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At a time when so called social networking applications and sites are used and incorporated in daily life contexts by more and more people, these media have become important tools for communication and community building in the Second Language (L2) learning contexts. This study focused on the establishment and development of a Web 2.0 learning Community of Practice (CoP) in a virtual learning environment (VLE) using Skype as a social network. By addressing social networking applications and services, this article provides an empirically based perspective on how the establishment and cultivation of a Virtual Community of Practice can enhance and promote second language learning. In the virtual community of practice studied, second language (L2) learners joined a virtual community as peripheral participants to foster their communicative competence as learners who had previously studied Swedish as a foreign language by distance. Findings from the study will be examined to unpack the challenges involved in developing and sustaining online communities of practice that support second language acquisition.

Introduction

At a time when so called social media or social networking tools are being used by more and more people, these tools have become important for communication and community building in education (Preece, 2000; Wenger, 1999; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The use of

technology is increasingly seen as a key cornerstone for second language learning (R. Godwin-Jones, 2005) and a large number of the second language learning institutions across the globe have adopted ICT-mediated technologies either as a single mode of offering instruction or as a complementary mode for the acquisition of a second language (Rosell-Aguilar, 2005; Svensson, 2001; Y.-F. Yang, Yeh, & Wong, 2010).

ICT-mediated technologies such as social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn) and voice over IP (VoIP) social networking applications (e.g.) Skype, IChat, and MSN Messenger, accordingly, have become one of the most popular tools among second language learners. By fostering interaction, collaboration, co-creating, co-editing, and co-construction of knowledge, social networking tools put learners in direct contact with others and offer authentic communication. In other words, these technologies have opened up possibilities for personal and group interaction and collaborative learning that enriches learning performance, both for individual knowledge construction and group knowledge sharing (Liaw, Chen, & Huang, 2008). This helps learners to foster their personal knowledge development through meaningful negotiation and communication.

There is support for the notion that autonomous learners' need their learning environments o be facilitated by a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning (Vallance, Vallance, & Matsui, 2009). It is also "a widely-held belief that a high level of interaction is desirable and positively affects the effectiveness of any distance education course" (Kearsley, 1995, p. 366). As Palloff and Pratt suggest, "key to the learning process are the interactions among students themselves, the interactions between faculty and students, and the collaboration in learning that results from these instructions" (2003, p. 5). Similarly, a number studies suggest that online forums can provide not only information but also mutual support among learners (Adler & Adler, 2008; Stommel & Koole, 2010)(Smithson et al., 2010).

Similar to interactions in conventional language learning settings, a number of studies have indicated that interactions among L2 learners in online learning environments make significant contributions to their learning (B. Godwin-Jones, 2003; Rosell-Aguilar, 2005; S.-H. Yang, 2009). This echoes Vygotsky's (1978) idea that an individual's learning may be enhanced through engagement with others and involvement (within a community) which enables the extension of that person's capabilities. The learning that evolved from the CoPs are

collaborative, "in which the collaborative knowledge of the community is greater than any individual knowledge" (Johnson, 2001, p. 54)

Initiating virtual communities can lay the groundwork for enhanced interactions, negotiation of meaning, and particularly spoken interactions among L2 learners. In the same vein, Long and Robinson (1998) argue that the conditions for L2 learning can be significantly improved when second language learners negotiate meaning with each other in a Community of Practice (Preece, 2000; Wenger, 1999; Wenger, et al., 2002; Wertsch, 1991). This approach emphasizes the way in which the learners can learn together through both "formal and informal participation in a range of shared practices within relatively dense and close-knit communities. Participation gradually endows individuals with tacit knowledge and legitimate membership" (Sunley, Pinch, & Reimer, 2011, p. 379).

Similarly, Hellermann (2008) pointed out that a virtual CoP places language learning in the context of social practices and mutual negotiations. He argues that a community of practice has coherence created by three factors: indigenous enterprise, regime of mutual accountability, and shared repertoire. He also suggests that meaning in communities is derived through the negotiation of two main components, *participation* and *reification,* and examines the potential for a community of practice to negotiate meaning as it respects the informed contributions of all members. Thus, the acquisition of a second language needs to be seen as "an outcome of participating in discourse" (Ellis, 2003, p. 78). Such *participation in discourse* can be achieved through virtual CoPs in distance language learning settings. Accordingly, it can be argued that initiating a virtual community of practice among L2 learners can enhance interactions among learners and thus create a rich environment for acquiring a second language.

Despite the importance of interaction and community building in learning, especially in learning Second language learning (L2), there was, may is, limited opportunities for distance Swedish L2 learners to interact with each other and negotiate meaning and/or exchange ideas. Rosell-Aguilar (2005) argues that one-way interaction (from teacher to students) without students' active engagement and interactions could not furnish a proper environment for L2 learning. Addressing such concerns, this article examines how interactions among distance L2 (Swedish) learners can be extended in order to enhance language acquisitions among new immigrants. This was done by establishing a virtual CoP in Skype as a social networking tool

among adult immigrants in Sweden who were registered in a public funded language learning institution.

Theoretical approach

The theoretical perspective in this study is built on the assumption that learning is a constant social process. This means that all human activities formed by any event result in change for human beings. From such a perspective, learning occurs extensively beyond formal education as people engage in different communities of practice. This study will employ Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning as its theoretical basis. His theory focuses on learning as social participation, and uses the assumptions that humans are social beings; knowledge is competence in relation to valued enterprises, knowing involves active engagement, and meaning is a combination of active engagement and experience. It should be noted that in a community, learning is a process that occurs twice; first on a social level through participating in a social practice, and then, on an individual level through taking part in activities among others. This theoretical framework will complement the focus on how virtual communities of practices in social contexts emerge, develop and are used in learning in general and language learning in particular. Later on, the theories within this general theoretical framing will serve as a bridge to understand and interpret the conducted study on virtual learning communities as L2 (Swedish) learners participate in social practices.

Social Networking Tools: Skype

Advances in technologies such as ICT have opened up a wide range of opportunities for people around the world to learn and connect together. In line with such advances, the emerging Web 2.0 phenomenon has facilitated community-building and direct user participation and interaction through the use of web-embedded services such as Social Networking Sites, multimedia sharing sites, and integrated non-browser Internet applications such as chat rooms, Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. These ICT-based interactive tools are mostly centered around developing online/virtual communities based on greater degrees of interactivity, inclusion, and collaboration (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Thomas, 2009). Web 2.0 technologies have opened up a wide variety of communicative channels which can be used for structured language learning purposes. With regard to voice communications specifically, synchronous,

peer-to-peer voice-over-IP (P2P VoIP) tools such as GoogleTalk, MSN Messenger, Skype, Yahoo Messenger, and others are examples of interactive tools that are likely to play an increasingly important role in online community-building and language learning (Mullen, Appel, & Shanklin, 2009; Suter, Alexander, & Kaplan, 2005).

Skype, the free peer to peer (P2P) based voice over Internet protocol (VOIP) application, is one of several networking tools in the cyber world that have emerged to foster communication between distantly separated users. Providing voice over IP (VoIP) and instant messaging (IM), Skype enable users to connect directly from their computer to the computers of other users. Apart from its user-friendly features that allow users to connect easily by selecting a name in their contact list, Skype offers group video and voice chats or conference for up to *25* people. In this social networking application, the user only needs to log-in and connect with all of the participants simultaneously. Skype can also easily transfer files during conversations from one learner's account to another learner's computer. Offering instant messaging along with video and audio conferencing, Skype establishes communication between distantly separated users. Skype's slogan "the whole world can talk for free" precisely reflects its core service. By affording a variety of opportunities, Skype can be an excellent example of the kinds of Internet technologies that can be used for educational applications.

Analytical approach and Method

With an analytical approach that draws on ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1984) and cyber-ethnographic (Browne, 2003), this study investigated second language learners in a virtual CoP. The approach taken allowed participants to be studied *in*-situ as they established a virtual CoP (Jalbert, 1999). Accordingly, the analysis is focused on what participants' local discourse and actions (Browne, 2003).

The empirical materials for this study were collected through synchronous chat sessions among SAS B[1] L2 learners participating in a virtual CoP_during 15 virtual sessions that were carried out using "Skype" as a virtual environment. This material includes 15 audio recordings, each lasting from 60 to 90 minutes which have been transcribed and analyzed. In all studied

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[1] Swedish as second language (Svenska som andra språk)

virtual sessions, eight L2 learners participated in the recorded sessions. In these virtual sessions a variety of issues e.g. the participants' assignments, etc. were addressed.

The unit of analysis in this study is the spoken interaction of participants during the recorded chats. These contributions will be referred to as utterances, reflecting a perspective on communication where people's discursive actions are viewed as integral to the co-ordination of social interaction in situated practices (Bakhtin, 1986). Each utterance is simultaneously a response to what has been said and creates a platform for continued interaction. This implies that these vocal utterances are contributions to a social process where the participants 'do' and interact with each other to enhance their learning environments. "Interacting with each other" in this sense can be seen as an activity that implies more than simply engaging in neutral forms of information exchange involving, for instance, solving common problems, planning work, and maintaining social relationships with classmates.

The analysis presented in this article is based on selected threads of discourse that were chosen from the material collected over a two month period. All the material from the virtual CoP was read by the authors and extracts were selected for their relevance in illustrating aspects of establishing, belonging and maintaining virtual CoPs. However, in each case, the phenomena described in the selected threads were found to be recurring throughout the collected material. It should be mentioned that the analytical sections of this article build upon each other and are designed to be read in a sequential order to draw on the ways L2 learners' interactions can be enhanced in a virtual CoP.

Participants and procedure

In this virtual CoP, eight (seven participants from the first virtual CoP session and one participant volunteered later to be part of the CoP from the ninth session on) adult L2 learners participated. These participants volunteered and accepted to take part in the virtual CoP after the aims and procedures of the actual study were described to them. All the participants were female immigrants from across the world with different cultural and educational backgrounds. Three of them had Bachelor's degrees in Law, Psychology and Computer Science respectively, and four participants had no higher education background. Similarly, ICT literacy among the participants also varied. Some of the participants had no basic knowledge of online chat programs like Skype and thus, initially, the volunteers were given handy hints about the program such as how to

download and run it on their PCs. Of the seven participants, three had fulltime jobs that prevented them from participating in traditional face-to-face second language classes, forcing them to take part in distance courses.

To construct the virtual CoP, the researcher created a chat-room on Skype with a user ID and password for each of the participants. Their user IDs and passwords were sent to their e-mail addresses and they were asked to download and log-in to the program at a specified time. Only four of the participants could initially log-in to Skype in the first session and the remaining three had to be helped through the process by the researchers over a telephone.

Results

Intending to enhance spoken interactions among L2 learners, a virtual CoP was initiated and interaction among L2 learners was investigated. Considering the life cycle of CoPs (Elliot & Finsel, 2008; Wenger, et al., 2002), the analysis is organized as two complementary phases:

1- **The development of a virtual CoP**

   - Initiating a virtual CoP

   - Sustaining Membership and Active participation in the CoP

2- **From peripheral to core**

   - Becoming part of the CoP

   - Engagements with the task

   - Vocabulary development

The development of a virtual CoP

Addressing the establishment and development of a virtual CoP from early creation to maturation, these excerpts characterize the life cycle (birth and growth) of a virtual CoP intended to enhance spoken interaction among distance L2 learners are provided.

Initiating a virtual CoP

The first stages and early birth of a CoP life cycle starts with informal collaboration and communication between individuals who share ideas and aims (Wenger & Snyder, 2003). Similar to conventional CoPs, the virtual CoP was initiated with greetings among the facilitator

and participants. This greeting was followed by a brief introduction from each participant. It should be noted that one of the researchers participated in this virtual CoP as a facilitator. Accordingly, the facilitator first took the floor to encourage the participants to contribute by raising different questions and suggesting ideas about how to proceed.

Excerpt 1 (Week 1 of CoP, 9:00 PM):

1. Asil	What do we talk about?	Vad ska vi prata om?
2. Hammra	(++)What do you think? (++)You can talk about different things.	(++)vad tycker ni? (++)ni kan prata om olika saker
3. Hammra	(+)You can talk about your homework or you can introduce yourselves first.	(+) ni kan prata om era läxor eller ni kan presentera er först.
4. Hammra	(+)(+)How long, how long have you been in Sweden, Asil? (+) uhm, what did you study in your country?	(++)Hur länge, hur länge har du varit i Sverige Asil? (+) uhm va har du läst i i ditt land?

As indicated in excerpt one, after a few seconds of greeting each other, one of the more daring participants expressed her concern about what participants were supposed to do in the virtual setting. Such confusion was mirrored in several early sessions as the participants had little awareness of what ways and how to act in a virtual CoP. Considering this issue, in the next turn, after a long pause, the facilitator tried to clarify the aims and procedures of this virtual CoP again. "You can talk about your homework or you can introduce yourself first". Her argument was centered on the procedures and advantages of virtual CoPs, emphasizing that participants could talk about a variety of issues and subjects on the basis of their interests. As Wenger and Snyder (2003) argue a CoP can be initiated when members or participants have similar interests and goals in a common context. In the same vein, the facilitator suggests one common ground that they can share addressing referring to their assignments and tasks. After that the participants are quiet so the facilitator tries to find a way to invite them to speak up and be active participants. She pauses and continues with the direct question to Asil with (++) "How long, how long have you been in Sweden, Asil? (+) uhm, what did you study in your country?" With informal questions such as "where are you from" and "how is your family", she tries to foster discussion amongst the participants. Such informal questions can help participants to learn about each other and can also enhance trust among them. According to Elliot & Finsel (2008) informal

communications and interactions will sometimes lead to "a core group that emerges and begins to explore ways to meet on a more regular basis"(p.28).

At this stage, the community is initiated through members who have similar aspirations and goals in a common context. The main features of this stage of a community of practice, as highlighted by Wenger (1998), are mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and negotiation of meaning. In the second and third stages, which are reflected in the following excerpts, the members of community try to benefit from each other.

Becoming Members of the CoP

During the life cycle of a CoP, a number of newcomers may try to become members. Addressing the maturation of the CoP, the following excerpt deals with why and how a newcomer joins a virtual CoP. The newcomer may learn from her friends or other resources about the virtual CoP and become interested in joining. In this case, basic information about the virtual CoP was given to the newcomer by her friend (Asil). In the following excerpt the CoP members (Asil, Rafat and Mona) discuss the participation of a newcomer.

Excerpt 2 (Week 4 of CoP, 8:00 PM):

1. Asil	My friend also reads SAS B at distance and would like to join us on Skype. I have told her, um what we do on Skype. She is also um interested in joining us. (+) What do you think?	min kompis läser också SASB distans skulle tycka om at att vara med oss på Skype. Jag Jag har berättat för henne uhm vad vi gör på på Skype. Hon har uhm också intresse att hänga med. (+)Vad tycker ni?
2. Rafat	(+) That is good. She can also join us in in our discussion.	(+)Det är bra. Hon kan kan också vara i i vår diskussion.
3. Mona	I agree. (+) When we we are um many we can discuss more. We can um help each other and learn from um one another.	Jag håller med. (+) När är vi vi uhm många kan vi diskutera mer. Vi kan uhm hjälpa varandra och lära oss från uhm av varandra.

In line 1 Asil speaks about her friend's interest in joining the CoP. She asks what the other participants think of a new member joining the virtual CoP. Rafat pauses briefly and says that it is a good idea if a newcomer takes part in their discussion. She shows her agreement by saying "it is good". In line 3, Mona affirms that she agrees too, by saying" I agree". She then follows

that up by saying that their discussion in the virtual CoP can be enhanced if many people contribute to it. She invites the participants to work together by saying "we can um help each other and learn from um one another". As demonstrated in this excerpt, most of the participants supported a newcomer joining the CoP. This implies that the participants may have seen a newcomer joining their CoP as an opportunity that opens up a flow of dialogue and discussion for their shared goals and interests.

Sustaining Membership and Active participation in the CoP

The third stage of the CoPs life cycle can be characterized as constructing useful procedures, activities, artifacts, adapting to changing circumstances, new ideas, documentation, and relationships. Active participation of the members in the aforementioned activities and tasks largely determine who belongs to a CoP (the membership becomes important for which tasks are fulfilled). In this case, members of the virtual CoP were actively engaged in exercises for the development of their activities. To develop the virtual CoP, as is indicated in the following excerpt, the participants tried to take an active role in determining when and on what they should concentrate. This issue was addressed in several different virtual sessions.

Excerpt 4 (Week 3 of CoP, 7:30 PM):

1. Asil	I am trying to read the book, um, Book & Web this week and then a few articles about Don Quijote[2]. We can discuss all questions next time on Skype. What do you think?	Jag försöker a att läsa boken uhm bok & webb denna vecka och och sen några artiklar om Don do Quijote . (+)Vi kan diskutera alla frågorna nästa gång på Skype. (+)Vad tycker ni?
2. Rafat	By next week, um, we should write and send all the questions and answers to Carolina. I saw a message from her in course portal.	(++) Till nästa vecka uhm vi måste skriva alla svaren och skicka dem till Carolina. Jag såg ett meddelande från Carolina i Lärportalen.
3. Milla	Is it ok with you Tomorrow? We can then review all the questions.	Går det bra imorgon? Vi hinner gå igenom alla frågorna .

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[2] This book and those articles are part of their learning resources that they should read in this course "Swedish as second language" SAS B

4.	Asil	Not, right now, my boss just called me from work. I shall have to work tomorrow, so I may not to finish Don Quijote and Book & Web. Anyhow I will make it until Wednesday, I think so. So, that I will starting to read the Don Quijote and try to catch with you. I can be finished with my homework by the weekend. We can discuss on Saturday evening or Sunday evening. Is that all right?	Nej, Just nu ringde min chef från jobbet. Jag ska jobba i morgon och kanske hinner jag inte klara läxan om Don Quijote och bok & webb. Men i alla fall hinner jag till onsdag, tycker jag. Så att jag börjar läsa om Don Quijote och försöker hinner ikapp er. Jag kan bli färdig med min läxa kanske i helgen. Vi kan diskutera lördagskväll eller Söndagskväll. Är det okej för er?
5.	Rafat	I think I can make it on Saturday evening, but after 9 o'clock.	Jag tror att jag kan komma på lördagskväll men efter klockan 9.
6.	Mona	I can too, but I cannot get on Skype before 9:30 PM. I have to put my children to bed.	jag kan också men jag kan inte komma på Skype innan 9:30 . Jag måste lägga mina barn
7.	Hamideh	If I manage to read it, I will come on Saturday.	Om jag hinner läsa färdigt kommer jag på lördag.

As indicated in line 1, Asil tries to draw the discussion towards the next chat session by saying "I am trying to read the book, um, this week and then a few articles about Don Quijote. What do you think? With this suggestion she outlines what they can concentrate on in the next virtual session. In line 2, Rafat states that they have to do their tasks on *Don Quijote* by next week and she means that they have to read the book and articles. Moreover, Rafat refers to the course portal in which the teacher of this course (SAS B) puts messages about their tasks related to *Don Quijote* and the date by which these tasks must be completed "we should write and send all the questions and answers to Carolina. I saw a message from her in course portal". In other words, by planning the groups' next step, Asil' turns to the entire group and she asks "what do you think?" With this question, she opens up the debate for the next discussion and mutual engagement between the participants. In the next line after a little pause between the participants Rafat addresses a question to Asil about when they are going to finish the tasks. She emphasizes that they have to do their homework and send it to the teacher by next week. By entering the link in a Skype instant message, she directs the attention of the participants to the course portal while simultaneously saying "I saw a message from Carolina in the course portal". By doing this, she refers to the course portal as one of the learning resources. It should be mentioned that all of the

information and news related to the actual course was provided to the learners in the course portal.

From peripheral to core

In CoPs, learners are "connected by more than their ostensible tasks. They are bound by intricate, socially constructed webs of belief, which are essential to understanding what they do" (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p. 34). In such "shared practices" a number of the participants are *peripheral* and a few are central. Some of the participants do not/cannot participate actively in the CoP's activities and remain on the margins, watching and listening (listening in the context of this study) the activities of the core and active participants. Mastery of a field is considered to be a process that starts from the peripheral and ends with the core. When a learner or a newcomer is moving from the sidelines to the center of a CoP, according to Wenger (1998), learning is occurring and that newcomer is becoming a master in the given CoP. *"Legitimate peripheral participation"*, provides a way to formulate the relationships between newcomers and established members that facilitates the transition from peripheral to core (Lave & Wenger, 1991).What follows is an account of how newcomers can become masters by moving from the sidelines to the center of a CoP.

Engagement with tasks

In Situated Learning, the term 'participation' and "legitimate *peripheral* practice" implies an apprentice's journey from novice to master within a CoP. The interplay between Masters (more experienced members) and newcomers or peripheral participation is an important dimension in the transformation of individuals (newcomers) thorough the creation of rich environments for mastering a specific task. Most of the discussions in the CoP studied were about engagement with tasks. In the engagement with tasks phase, the participants used spoken interactions as they solved problems, answered questions and negotiated their shared tasks and other issues. Since the participants had different mother tongues, in most cases the only way they could communicate was through the Swedish language.

In excerpt 6, the participants (Shiar, Rafat and Asil) talk about their tasks. They discuss the content of the book that they have been asked to study before taking a national language

proficiency exam (Nationalt Prov). As the participants point out, they need to look for more learning resources about the ideas discussed in the book.

Excerpt 6 (Week 5 of CoP, 7:30 PM):

1. Rafat	Have you read Robinsson?	(+) Har ni läst Robinsson?
2. Asil	A little	Litegrann
3. Mona	Bloody Robinsson. I don't know why we have to read novels like that.	Jävla Robinsson. Jag vet inte varför vi måste läsa såna romaner.
4. Asil	What is his problem?	vad e hans problem?
5. Rafat	He says that I am stranded on a a terribly desolate, without uhm any hope of salvation. Page 70 (+). I am uhm separated from humanity. (+) uhm I have no clothes to wear. I have no interaction with any humans, no one to talk to and who can comfort me. I have not got the ability to defend myself against attacks by humans and animals. These are some important points that I have found.	Han säger att att ja jag e uppkastad på en en förfarligt öde ö, utan uhm hopp om räddning. sidan 70. (+) Jag e uhm avskild från hela världen. (+) uhm jag har inga kläder att skyla mig med. Jag är avskild från mänskligheten, från samvaron med människor. Jag har ingen människa som jag kan tala med och som kan trösta mig. Jag saknar möjligheter att försvara mig motangrepp från människor och djur. De e viktiga punkter som jag har hittat.
6. Asil	And what is the positive side?	Och gott sidan eller det goda?
7. Rafat	Yes, (+) I am alive and didn't drown, as all my shipmates. (+) I am living in in a warm climate. (+) uhm If I had any clothes, I would hardly have been able to carry them.(+)	Ja,(+) jag är vid liv och har inte drunknat som alla mina skeppskamerater. (+) Jag lever i i ett varmt klimat. (+) uhm Om om jag hade kläder, skulle j jag knap knappast kunna bära dem.
8. Mona	Ok Robinson is not so important. Since we have exams this week, we can go through the questions for the three epochs. What do you think? I mean, we we will focus on on the second exam and not discuss Robinsson anymore. (+) Do you understand what what I mean?	Ok Robinsson är inte så viktig. Eftersom vi har prov denna vecka kan vi gå igenom frågorna för de tre epokerna. Vad tycker ni? Jag menar, vi vi ska sätta fokus på på andra provet och inte diskutera mer på Robinsson. (+)Förstår ni vad vad jag menar?

In the first line Rafat draws the attention of the participants to the book Robinsson by asking "have you read Robinson?", thus demanding they pay attention to their task. As far as this task is concerned "the analysis of the Robinsson novel" is one of the main assignments of the course. In this question Rafat uses the word "you" to make all participants answerable. Then, Asil replies that she has not read a lot of Robinsson, by saying "A little". Mona does not take Rafat's question seriously and responds to her question with faint laughter, and retorts "Bloody Robinsson. I do not know why we have to read novels like that."

Addressing the pointed question, Rafat tries to give a serious response to the Asil's question. She plays an active role in terms of answering questions, introducing further resources and links,

and asking questions that help stimulate debate in the virtual CoP. Next, Asil asks another question of the participants. Her question implies that she is satisfied with Rafat's response to her earlier question. Asil's question is about Robinsson, "what is the positive side?" This question leads to silence for almost one minute until Rafat takes the floor to direct the discussion. She responds positively to Asils' question by saying "yes". She pauses briefly and then continues by reading out the answers to the questions from the course book "I am alive and did not drown, as all my shipmates. (+) I live in in a warm climate. (+) Uhm if I had any clothes, I would hardly have been able to carry them". Rafat's pause gives Mona an opportunity to put herself forward as the one to address the question. Her explanation to the group indicates that the group has to shift the subject of the discussion and pay attention to the examination that they are going to have in the next week. Mona's clarifications indicate that this examination is more vital than their homework. She argues that discussion about Robinsson cannot be a priority because they should prepare for the exam. Interestingly, in this exert the participants offer their own thoughts and contributions through long sentences in comparison with their earlier sentences. For instance, Mona puts forwards that "Robinsson is not so important. Since we have tests this week, we go through the questions for the three epochs. What do you think? I mean, we will focus on the second test and not spend more time on Robinson. (+) Do you understand what I mean?"

Similarly in excerpt 7, the participants (Shiar, Rafat and Asil) talk about their tasks. They discuss the content of the book that they have to study before the national exam (Nationalt Prov).

Excerpt 7 (Week 6 of CoP, 7:0 0 PM):

1. Shiar	What are we going to do? (+) I mean uhm, are we discussing the first text?	Vad ska vad ska vi göra? (+) Jag menar uhm ska vi diskutera första texten?
2. Rafat	We can uhm start with the first text, uhm I I've found uhm some good links.	vi kan uhm börja med med första texten, uhm jag jag har hittat uhm några bra länkar.
3. Asil	We can uhm go through them. I have found a few more.	Vi kan uhm gå gå igenom dem. Jag har hit hittat några till.
4. Rafat	I will send them to you now.	Jag skickar dem till er nu.
5. Asil	Ok, thanks.	okej, tack
6. Shiar	I've found some articles also.	Jag har hittat några artiklar också
7. Rafat	Now I will send two articles that you should read quickly. Rafat pop up the following links: http://www.pedagog.lu.se/forskning/skrifter.htm. http://www.helsinki.fi/filosofia/k2007/Wallgren.htm	Nu skickar jag två artiklar som ni bara får läsa snabbt. Rafatskriver: http://www.pedagog.lu.se/forskning/skrifter.htm. http://www.helsinki.fi/filosofia/k2007/Wallgren.htm
8. Asil	We can collect ideas, what do you think?	vi kan samla idéer, vad tycker ni?

Directing the question to all of the participants, Shiar asks "what are we going to do? (+)". Her question is followed by another question to the group "I mean um, are we discussing the first text?" At this juncture Shiar first asserts "I mean" probably to implicate herself more openly as sharing the accountability with the other participants and her purpose is to make clear her own responsibility in this matter. In this line she also uses "we" to make the other participants accountable in the CoP. At this point, emphasis is put on the assignment "are we discussing the first text?[3]" (which is related to the final test) in the debate. Then, Rafat agrees with Shiar's idea that they can start from the first text[4]. She adds that she has searched for more resources and information on the Internet about the first text. Moreover, she also points out that she has found some resources about the first text "We can um start with the first one, um I I've found um some good links." Asil confirms and agrees with Rafats idea by saying "ok, thanks". In the next line, Shiar says that she also has found more articles "I've found some articles also". This may imply that Shiar, as a newcomer, is moving from periphery to the center by taking an active role (it should be noted that she joined the virtual CoP in session 9)(see excerpts 2, 3).

By sharing the articles with all participants, Rafat says "Now I will send two articles that you should read quickly". Asil suggests that they can accomplish this "assignment" successfully through collecting information and scrutinizing further resources "We can collect ideas". She also acknowledges that all of the participants have the right to decide what they should do, through asking the participants "what do you think?" This excerpt addresses mutual engagement and negotiation of meaning around the given assignments. Through oral discussions and mutual engagement, the participants attempted to accomplish their tasks. Prior to these sessions the participants had read the texts in the course book and they add further information about the content of each text. The participants introduced objects of negotiation that were about the *course problems* and the *final test*[5]. As mentioned, some of the participants such as Rafat are at the center of the CoP through addressing different questions and helping others. Playing such an active role is "essential to the success of a virtual community" (Li, Zeng, Mao, & Wang, 2008, p. 356). It needs to be pointed out that discussion amongst the participants is not limited only to their tasks. They also talked in some of chat sessions about their private lives. For example Mona in chat session 10 talks about her job and personal life.

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[3] Moderna tider (modern times)
[4] The first text is from the course book Moderna tider (Modern times).
[5] National examination

Vocabulary development

Moving from peripheral to center, vocabulary not only matters but is vital to learning L2. Wenger (1998) argues that the participants in a community of practice do not accrue information and knowledge from the outside, but rather contribute through activities, tasks, etc. that are distributed between the individuals, tools, symbols and artifacts of a community. In other words, knowledge development resides in the community of practice. Similarly, in the studied CoP, the participants tried to develop their vocabulary through explaining and interpreting vague concepts.

In the following excerpt, the participants' (Milla, Rafat, Asil and Shiar) discussion is centered on defining the concept of "globalization". Milla, initially asks a question about globalization, indicating that she has no idea what the meaning of the concept is. As this excerpt continues, the participants address the notion of globalization from different points of view to help Milla understand this elusive concept.

Excerpt 7 (Week 6 of CoP, 8:00 PM):

1. Rafat	Globalizations, for example, (+) lately there have been many discussions about globalization. (++) the modern era is also characterized by this.	Globalisering, t.ex. (+) på på sista tiden uhm har man pratat om om globaliseringen.(++) De det utmärker också moderna tiden.
2. Asil	Yes, exactly	Ja, précis
3. Milla	What does globalization mean?	Vad betyder globalisering?
4. Asil	(+) This means the ease with which new businesses opened in other countries.	(+)Det betyder att de att de öppnar nya företag i i andra länder.
5. Milla	Yes, Yes	Ja. Ja
6. Asil	For example, uhm (+) Volvo has its products uhm in different countries.	T.ex. uhm (+) Volvo har sina uhm i olika länder.
7. Shiar	This means that that there is no border between countries.	Det betyder att att det inte finns någon gräns mellan länder.
8. Rafat	Now with the Internet and virtualization, we can buy something from the U.S for example.	Nu med Internet och virtualiseringen kan vi köpa nånting t.ex från USA.

In line 97, Rafat points out that globalization is one of the main attributes of our age. She tries to give an account of globalization by mentioning that "lately there have been many discussions about globalization". Next, Asil confirms Rafat's comment about globalization by just saying "yes, exactly" which demonstrates that she has also the same understanding of

globalization. Addressing globalization, Milla raises a question "What does globalization mean?" Her question opens up a new discussion among the participants. After a pause, Asil addresses Milla's question and tries to clarify the concept of globalization by expressing "This means the ease with which new businesses opened in other countries". She tries to define this word very simply by giving a concrete example. Milla, by saying "yes, yes", indicates that she understands the concept.

In a similar way, in line 6, Asil tries to explain globalization further by giving a simple example from their own context by noting "Volvo has its products "uhm" in different countries". Shiar then takes the floor and explains what globalization is from her perspective. She points out that because of the globalization there is no border between countries. "This means that that there is no border between countries". Similarly, Rafat continues their discussions about globalization by addressing another dimension of globalization. She notes that in a globalized world one can buy goods and products from other countries virtually on the Internet "now with the Internet and virtualization, we can buy something from the U.S for example". The aforementioned excerpt indicates how the participants' vocabulary can be developed in virtual CoP through negotiating of meaning. The participants negotiate and define the indefinite concepts in their virtual settings. Such negotiations assisted them to come to new understandings and move forward.

Discussion and reflection

In this article we have considered how creating and developing a virtual community can support and enhance L2 learning among adult immigrants. The analysis focused on spoken interactions (online conversational activities) produced on Skype during a six month period. Second language learning has been considered to be a social practice that is situated in learning context that is undertaken informally and outside of the classroom. Learning in such a CoP has been considered to be a dynamic, contextualized process of member progression that is facilitated by interactions.

As Social networking applications and sites are incorporated in daily life contexts, online environments need to be considered by institutions and L2 learners as resources for building new communicative arenas for e.g. knowledge construction, community building, learning, information exchange and discussions. By offering a large set of people and recourses, social networking applications and tools can support both cooperation and collaboration among

learners. These tools can be used for structured language learning purposes (Carroll, 2008; Harrison & Thomas, 2009). However, learners need "guidance", "support", "acknowledgment" and "amusement" in order to use these social networking applications and sites effectively (Boud & Middleton, 2003; Jones & Preece, 2006) and to "resist using Web 2.0 with a Web 1.0 pedagogy" (Harrison & Thomas, 2009, p. 113). Representing a particular way of connecting the many places in which L2 learners learn and act collectively, the studied virtual CoP can be seen as a vehicle for language and for the contextualization of practices in informal learning settings which can and should be connected to formal language learning settings.

According to the findings of this study, it can be argued that encouraging and supporting L2 learners to use virtual CoPs can significantly enhance their interactions, and open up opportunities for cooperation and collaboration with other L2 learners. The studied CoP provides a degree of flexibility (beyond time and place limitations); independence and choice to adult participants, who are learning Swedish as a second language in addition to raising families and working outside of the home. In this sense, a virtual CoP among L2 learners is seen not only as a community to satisfy the learners needs and interests but also a resource for language learning that supports the actual practices and daily tasks of the participants at whatever point they may be in their learning (Hibbert & Rich, 2006). In such virtual communities of practice the participants share the characteristics of indigenous enterprise, regimes of mutual accountability and shared repertoire in which participants can derive meaning and enhance their capabilities in learning new languages. The particular virtual CoP discussed in this article focuses just on how virtual community can support and enhance L2 learning, but it may has wider implications. Each CoP can have its own cycle of life and practices that should be renegotiated during its maturation. This can offer ways of identifying and avoiding problems and breakdowns in establishing and maintaining of CoPs, and can also offers ways of increasing CoPs cohesion and its potential for knowledge building.

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