Review of LingQ as a PALL after one year of regular use*

Análisis de LingQ como PALL tras un año de uso

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out to analyse LingQ, an online platform for language learning created in 2007 by the polyglot Steve Kaufmann. Framed in CALL, an auto-ethnographic approach will be used to examine the author's experience of platforms and apps for language learning (PALL) during a year of autonomous study learning French on the platform. The study will try to demonstrate the alignment of LingQ's theoretical underpinnings with some of the main language learning theories which, at first, might seem incompatible. The analysis will show how the platform supports the learners' immersion in authentic texts, providing comprehensible input according to their interests while promoting vocabulary and grammar acquisition through noticing. In addition, it will explore how it leverages the role of culture as a booster of integrative motivation.

Keywords: *Authentic texts, autonomous study, CALL, comprehensible input, grammar, immersion, noticing, PALL, vocabulary.*

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RESUMEN

El presente artículo realiza un análisis de LingQ, una plataforma online para el aprendizaje de lenguas creada en 2007 por el políglota Steve Kaufmann. Partiendo del marco de CALL, se empleará un enfoque auto-etnográfico para examinar la experiencia de la autora con las plataformas y aplicaciones para el aprendizaje de lenguas (PALL) durante un año de estudio autónomo, aprendiendo francés a través de la plataforma. El estudio pretende demostrar la forma en que LingQ se alinea con los principios teóricos de algunas de las principales teorías del aprendizaje de lenguas que, en principio, pueden parecer incompatibles. El análisis mostrará cómo la plataforma apoya la inmersión de los aprendices en textos auténticos, proporcionando input comprensible acorde con sus intereses, al mismo tiempo que promueve la adquisición de vocabulario y gramática a través de la captación. Asimismo, se explorará cómo se vale del papel de la cultura como refuerzo de la motivación integradora.

Palabras clave: *CALL, captación, estudio autónomo, gramática, inmersión, input comprensible, PALL, textos auténticos, vocabulario.*

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THE NUMBER OF AVAILABLE PLATFORMS and apps for language learning, hereafter referred to as PALLs (Bączkowska, 2021), has been steadily increasing every year. Over the past 25 years, several of these platforms have been launched, including Rosetta Stone created in 1999, LingQ in 2007, Babbel in 2008, Busuu in 2008, Memrise in 2010, Duolingo in 2011, Lingopie in 2019 and more. However, the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020 led to a surge in PALLs to meet the growing demand for online language instruction (Loewen et al., 2020). As research in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has consistently shown (Liu et al., 2015; Karjo & Andreani, 2018; Loewen et al., 2020; Rebolledo & Gonzalez, 2023, etc.), there are many benefits to using PALLs. They offer flexibility, providing the opportunity to learn at one's own pace, set goals, and access a variety of resources, including videos, audio, grammar explanations, flashcards, and more. They can be used autonomously for self-guided study or as a complement to formal language instruction, both inside and outside the classroom. They provide easy access to authentic target language, immediate feedback, and the appeal of an attractive design. In addition, they often focus on cultural aspects associated with the target language communities to boost integrative motivation and promote cultural awareness.

Karasimos (2022) notes the difficulty of selecting the most suitable option, as we navigate an overwhelming sea of platforms that promise to turn us into fluent users of a language in a short period of time. When the platform is used as a complement to formal instruction, teachers can guide students in their choice, but when learners are studying autonomously, the decision-taking is more complex and personal. Once a platform has been chosen, another challenge that learners face is that of persevering in its use on a regular basis.

When assessing the platforms' effectiveness, positive language learning outcomes appear to be reduced to vocabulary and grammar learning. More specifically, several studies have pointed out the limitations of many of these platforms in enhancing the learners' oral communicative competence (Lord, 2016; Bączkowska, 2021; Metruk, 2022, etc.). However, despite these valid concerns, "it is possible that the discrete grammar and vocabulary instruction provided by some apps may be able to positively affect the development of productive language skills thought to draw more heavily on implicit (or proceduralized/automatized) language knowledge" (Loewen et al., 2020, p.213).

With these issues in mind, and to gain insight into the type of learning outcomes expected from PALL users and how platforms contribute to the development of their communicative competence, this study focuses on LingQ, a platform that has not received the attention it deserves in the literature (Karasimos, 2022). Though some authors have included it in their comparative studies (Liu et al., 2015; Bączkowska, 2021; Karasimos 2022, etc.), I have not succeeded in finding any in-depth analysis of LingQ. Other PALLs as Lingopie, Busuu, and Rosetta Stone were initially considered to be compared to LingQ, however, their inclusion would have compromised my objective of performing the detailed analysis that was found to be missing.

Returning to the previously mentioned studies of LingQ, Liu et al. (2015) conducted a careful comparison of 4 PALLs to examine their pedagogical merits as social network sites. However, as 9 years have passed since its publication and many changes have been introduced to the platform, an updated review is due.

Bączkowska's (2021) study, on the other hand, includes the analysis of no fewer than 30 PALLs and finds LingQ lacking in the following aspects: (1) it does not develop productive skills,

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(2) it does not cater for beginners, and (3) it does not encourage creativity. As for Karasimos' analysis of 5 PALLs (2022), he notes that LingQ does not provide a fixed itinerary for the user's progress. He also agrees with Bączkowska that it is not suitable for beginners.

In this context, the study aims to explore an updated version of LingQ from the perspective of a language learner user as well as its pedagogical affordances from a language teacher's point of view. Specifically, the following research questions (RQs) will be addressed:

RQ1: What are the main theoretical and pedagogical principles that underlie the way the platform works? Are they reflected in its design?

RQ2: What kind of language learning practice does the platform facilitate in terms of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation?

RQ3: How are language skills developed?

RQ4: What level of learner agency does it provide?

RQ5: Does it contribute to developing Intercultural competence?

LINGQ. SITE OVERALL DESCRIPTION

Created in 2007 by the Canadian polyglot Steve Kaufmann and his son Mark, this platform offers a large library of contents mainly built by its users. The number of languages currently supported is 45. Its main emphasis is on providing language learning resources and tools to help learners immerse themselves in their target languages and enhance their comprehension in context.

Among its contents the platform offers:

- Mini-stories: Aimed at beginners, they introduce short simple stories narrated in different persons, tenses, and

modes (affirmative, negative, and interrogative). They involve a lot of repetition.

- Guided courses: Arranged by competence levels, each comprises several lessons. It is worth noticing that not all guided courses have been put together by LingQ (some have been supplied by users), however the platform is responsible for most of the content in the beginner courses. They provide a more structured learning plan.

- A wide range of contents, organized in topics, is provided in the shape of authentic text including audio and often video. Topics include Books, Podcasts, News, Business, Entertainment, Sports, Technology, Health, Science, Travel, Politics, Food, History, Kids, Lifestyle, Songs, Language, Language YouTubers, Pronunciation, Grammar, and Culture.

Regarding the features of the platform:

- Each of these topics corresponds to a "shelf" in the "library" (see Figure 1). The mini-stories and the guided courses are also on different shelves. If users are not interested in the content offered by the platform in the library, they can import their own content from a file on their computer or the internet. Although the mini-stories and guided courses are created by the platform, most of the content is authentic imported by the users, building the platform's library. This is the main focus of this review.

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Figure 1 *LingQ's library*

Source: LingQ.

Once a piece of content has been selected by the user, it is referred to as a "lesson" and displayed in a reader's tool.

When we open a lesson, some words in the text appear highlighted in blue (Figure 2). These are the words that the platform considers unknown to the learner based on the competence level chosen when signing up as well as what its algorithm has learned about them throughout their use of the platform. As they click on a word (be it in blue or not), a list of definitions is displayed. They pick the definition that they consider best suits that word in that context and automatically it turns yellow. That means that the meaning of the new word has been saved. This is what the platform describes as "creating LingQs". According to the platform, the more LingQs users create, the more efficient their learning (2023a).

Figure 2 *Lesson layout*

Source: LingQ.

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In terms of access, users have the premium and the freemium options. The latter is free of charge, with no limit of time but users only have access to basic services. In a later section these limitations will be clarified. Also, it is a cross-platform application, allowing for access on both computers and mobile devices.

Regarding language levels, LingQ does not refer specifically to CEFR levels, instead rather vague labels are employed, namely: Beginner (1 and 2), Intermediate (1 and 2) and Advanced (1 and 2). Depending on the language, each level assumes a specific number of known words.

There is also a "Community" section that includes an extremely active forum (11,500 posts and 559 active users per week) where users can ask and answer questions related to the platform and to language learning in general, express and exchange opinions, raise complaints, meet other users, etc.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: UNDERLYING LANGUAGE LEARNING THEORIES

To understand Steve Kaufmann's approach to the creation of LingQ, a review was conducted of his guide to language learning, *The Linguist* (2003), published 4 years before the launch of the platform. In his work, Kaufmann combines chapters focused on his biography, where he narrates key episodes of his life that contributed to his transformation into a polyglot, with his beliefs concerning the fundamentals of language learning. It would appear that these beliefs (which will be detailed in the following sections) draw from three main theories of knowledge, each of them initially in conflict with the rest: Behaviorism and Cognitivism, in particular, Krashen's Monitor Theory and Schmith's Noticing Hypothesis.

In general terms, Behaviorism viewed language learning as a process of habit formation, which was facilitated by imitation,

reinforcement and repetition (Littlewood, 1998). Kaufmann (2003) echoes these beliefs when he states that "you need to overwork the language processing capability of your brain by constant and frequent repetition during a period of intense learning" (p.131). The structure of the mini-stories reflects this belief. This highly controlled input aims to help learners consolidate grammatical structures and vocabulary through repetition.

In contrast with Behaviorism, Cognitivism (which gained ground in the world of ELT in the 1970s and 1980s) focuses on the mental processing of information involved in language acquisition. Stephen Krashen, who was one of the main proponents of cognitivism and language acquisition, developed the Monitor Theory, a series of hypotheses about how adults attain their ability in a second language: (1) the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, (2) the Monitor Hypothesis, (3) the Natural Order Hypothesis, (4) the Input Hypothesis, and (5) the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021).

In his first hypothesis, Krashen (1981) distinguishes between acquisition, an unconscious process focused on meaning, and learning, a conscious process where attention is drawn to form. Although to him both processes are important and are connected, he holds that the acquisition process is key because it is the same that children activate when they are exposed to their first language. The Monitor Hypothesis posits that conscious learning only acts as a monitor or editor that checks and corrects one's language output. He identified different types of Monitor users depending on the extent to which they use their conscious knowledge in their production. While extreme monitor users might be excessively concerned with using conscious knowledge to polish their speaking and writing in detriment to their fluency, "under users" of monitor might hardly profit from this knowledge to improve their output. The Natural Order

Hypothesis suggests that language is acquired in a predictable sequence, and this order is not affected by explicit instruction. The Input Hypothesis states that learners acquire language by understanding input that is slightly beyond their current level of competence ("comprehensible input"). Finally, the Affective Filter Hypothesis highlights the role of emotional factors in language acquisition. According to this hypothesis, negative emotions as anxiety or lack of motivation can raise the affective filter and hinder language acquisition, while positive emotions can lower it and facilitate acquisition. For the purposes of this study, we will focus on hypotheses 1, 2, 4, and 5. As Atkinson (2011) puts it, this theory:

> Featured the provision of input to a language acquisition device, which, depending on whether (1) the input was "comprehensible", and (2) an "affective filter" (…) was "up" or "down", gained access to that input for processing purposes. If it did, and there was enough input, language acquisition automatically ensued. (Atkinson, 2011, p.13)

Based on this theory and in collaboration with Tracy Terrel, Krashen formulated The Natural Approach, a language teaching method that emphasizes subconscious, immersive language acquisition over explicit grammar instruction. This approach is rooted in the belief that language learning in adults mirrors the way children acquire their native language, advocating for a low-stress, communicative environment where learners are exposed to comprehensible input. Their main hypothesis is that: "We acquire language when we obtain comprehensible input, when we understand what we hear or read in another language" (Krashen & Terrel, 1983, p.1). They insist that comprehension leads to production.

As Kaufmann admitted (2022), at the time he wrote his guide, he was unfamiliar with Krashen's theory. However, this study will try to show that most of his principles support the underpinnings of the Monitor Theory. LingQ's slogan, displayed on its website[2], is: "Learn Languages from Content You Love". Similarly, as we scroll down, we can find the following marketing claim: "Immerse yourself in your new language. Everyone learns to speak their native language. Why not use the same approach with a second language? Surround yourself with meaningful input that matters to you". And later on: "Watch your comprehension and confidence grow. As you flood your brain with natural content and rapidly acquire words and natural phrasing, feel your comprehension skyrocket. With comprehension comes confidence and the ability to feel comfortable in any situation".

From a language learning perspective, these exhortations are unmistakably in line with Krashen's influential theory about second language acquisition and his focus on subconscious processes.

Later on, in the early 90s, Richard Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis, with his emphasis on attention and awareness in language learning, ran counter to Krashen's theory of a dual system that prioritized subconscious "acquisition" over conscious "learning". Although he agreed with Krashen in that "improvement in second language performance follows on the heels of understanding" (Schmidt, 1990, p. 147), according to this hypothesis, for input to turn into intake and thus lead to acquisition, forms need to be noticed and processed consciously (Schmidt, 1990; Robinson, 1995; Ünlü, 2015). In other words, learners must pay conscious attention to the language features they are exposed to before they can effectively learn and use them. These features can belong to

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2   https://www.lingq.com/en

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any aspect of the language (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, pragmatics) and, although their frequency of occurrence plays an important role, they need to be noticed to result in acquisition. The same happens with corrective feedback of the learner's mistakes, if they go unnoticed they will not contribute to their development.

In his blog, Kaufmann refers to the "language learning tripod" as the three feet that good language learners should stand on to succeed:

- Attitude: Moving away from an ethnocentric position and being prepared to embrace, not just the target language but also its culture. In this category, he also highlights willpower and confidence in success (2019a). This concept clearly connects with Gardner and Lambert's identification of integrative motivation (1972).
- Time spent with the language: This is paramount but we need to spend it learning in an enjoyable way for each of us (2019b).
- Noticing: Directly connected to Schmidt's hypothesis, he describes it as an ability we develop as we immerse ourselves in the language, it is "the key learning skill". To be able to start noticing we need "lots of exposure" (2019c).
- In the following sections, these aspects will be explored in more detail.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study based on an explorative-descriptive approach in which an auto-ethnographic method is used. Thus, I will rely on my own experience learning French as a second foreign language in LingQ for one year. The mean time devoted to the platform each day was 60 minutes. This experience was registered in a field journal that served as a reference to

analyze the platform through the table that will be presented subsequently as my survey instrument. It should be considered that I am a native speaker of Spanish and a teacher of English as a foreign language. English is my first foreign language. As for my proficiency level in French, I currently have a certified B1 CEFR level.

As clarified in the Introduction, unlike other studies that compare different language learning platforms (Gruba & Clark, 2013; Liu et al., 2015; Karjo & Andreani, 2018; Karasimos, 2022; Bączkowska, 2021), this one will be centered on only one, in an attempt to conduct a more detailed analysis.

It is important to acknowledge the potential limitations of this methodology. One such limitation is that the observations may be perceived as subjective and influenced by a number of factors, including the linguistic background, level of education, age, motivation, time available, digital competence, and other variables.

Survey instrument

Table 1 was designed in order to provide answers to the RQs posed at the beginning of this article. It is based on the model proposed by Karasimos (2022, p.154) but adapted to this research topic.

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TABLE 1 *Observation table*

Evaluation Criteria	Analyzed Aspects
INPUT	What kind of input is provided? How? Is it contextualized? Is it comprehensible?
LANGUAGE SKILLS	Analysis of how reading and listening skills are addressed. Does the app provide the learner with opportunities for speaking and writing? How? Does it facilitate opportunities to interact with other participants or native speakers?
VOCABULARY	How is vocabulary learning facilitated?
GRAMMAR	Is there an explicit approach to grammar? How does the app foster the learning of grammar?
PRONUNCIATION	How does the app address pronunciation?
CULTURE	Does the app contribute to building cultural awareness of the target language in the learner?

Source: Author.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Tapping into my user experience for one year as a data source, I analyzed the platform according to the variables described in the former table. My aim in this section was to examine each of these aspects from an objective perspective to gather information for further discussion.

Input

Kaufmann (2003) highlights the central role of "an input flood which trains your mind and prepares it for the more difficult task of expressing yourself in the new language" (p.103). LingQ provides input in the shape of text, audio and video. Among its sources are the media, blogs, podcasts, YouTube, etc. It is the user who decides which content to work on. Except for the mini-stories and some of the guided courses, the available input

is authentic and non-targeted, this is, "no specific vocabulary or grammar structures/forms are the focus of instruction" (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021, p.299). However, on the shelves related to language learning (i.e. Language YouTubers, Pronunciation, and Grammar) content is obviously targeted.
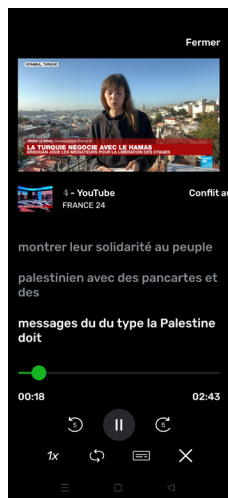
To import content, users can do it through an importing panel or they can use a browser extension to import it directly from the internet. This extension also allows them to import just selected text, not the whole page. The language is always contextualized because, even when it is just a selection of text, they have the option of returning to the original URL source. Some of the most common types of content imported by users are YouTube videos, blog posts, Netflix subtitles, song audio and lyrics, and e-books. Imported content is saved as a "private lesson". If we want to share it with the community, we need to "like" the content.

It should also be noted that when users import content, they are asked to save it into a "course". Each user organizes their own courses and names them following any criteria that suit their purposes: by source, topic, language focus, etc.

When an audio or video (file) is imported, if they do not have an integrated transcript, LingQ can generate it (using Whisper AI). However, the result is not always accurate since it depends on the permissions of the original source and, in the case of videos, on whether the subtitles are available or automatically generated by YouTube. In the case of transcriptions of YouTube–videos, we can click on a little button below that opens a pop-up window to watch the video (with the subtitles option). If we are on the app, the video is reproduced in sync with the text, as we can see in Figure 3. The advantage in this case is that the input is more contextualized because, along with the phrase that is being said (highlighted in white), the previous phrases are accessible.

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Figure 3 *Video in LingQ*

Note: LingQ's app reproduction of a YouTube video in sync with the transcript.
Source: LingQ.

In the Premium option, if a text does not have audio in its source, the platform can automatically generate it, however, the result is frequently artificial. Despite this, what is important to notice is that, for every text, students always have access to its written and oral form.

On the basis of the user's level, each piece of content displayed in the library indicates the percentage of new vocabulary. In addition, on the picture representing the lesson (Figure 4, inside the red circle), the blue oblong shows the number of new words. The yellow oblong indicates the number of words the learner is currently studying that appear in the lesson. Finally, the white shape shows how many words they know or they have told LingQ that they know (see "Vocabulary" section) are in

the lesson. At the bottom-left, learners can see the name of the course (Inner French) to which this content in particular belongs. Generally, the course is named after the source of the content.

Figure 4 *Lesson cover in LingQ's library*

Source: LingQ.

If a piece of content is too challenging, learners have the option of activating "Simplify Lesson (AI)", a function that provides a simplified version of the text, thus making the input more comprehensible. However, this function is not available for all contents.

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Language skills

Although productive skills are developed (as will be described later on), LingQ is mainly addressed at receptive skills. When users open a lesson, there are different options for interaction with the text. They can:

A) Read it using the page view (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 *LingQ's reading tool, page view*

Source: LingQ.

B) Read it using the sentence view (one sentence at a time). In this mode (see Figure 6), the platform offers the possibility of showing the translation (at the moment, the platform is using Deepl for automatic translations).

Figure 6 *LingQ's reading tool, sentence view*

Source: LingQ.

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C) Listen to the text (available for both page and sentence view). For each lesson, it is possible to check the length of the audio before opening it (see Figure 4). If the original source does not contain the audio, the platform generates it (in the settings, it is possible to choose between a male /female voice and different accents). Users can choose when to listen to it (before/after reading the text or as they read it) as well as the reproduction speed. As shown in Figure 7, another interesting option is the possibility of synchronizing audio and text (karaoke-style text scroll):

Figure 7 *LingQ's listening tool*
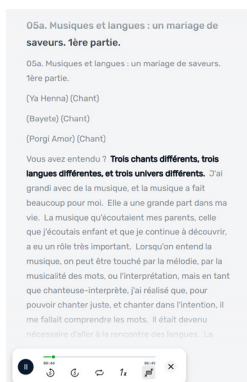
Source: LingQ.

D) As remarked in the previous section, if the source of the text is a YouTube video (see Figure 8), there is the option of watching it (with the subtitles on or off). Again, it is up to the user whether they do it before or after they read the text, or select the sync option.

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Figure 8 *YouTube player in LingQ*
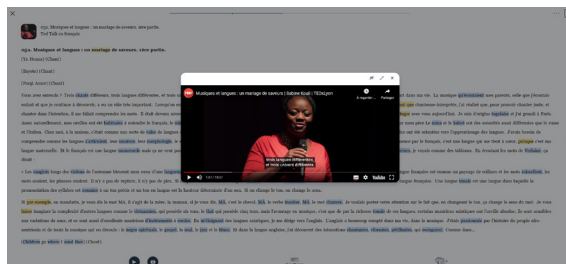
Source: LingQ.

In any case, the platform encourages its users to combine both language skills, i.e. to listen to what they read and read what they listen to, as a way of amplifying their exposure to input and multiplying the possibilities of noticing the patterns of the language.

It is important to note that reading in LingQ is interactive since individual words or phrases can be clicked to get the definitions and listen to their pronunciation, so it is an assisted reading tool. Also, through the sidebar options, users can activate "Show translation", which appears below each line (only in the Premium version).

When opening a lesson (see Figure 5):

- New words are highlighted in blue.
- Words highlighted in yellow are those whose meaning has been previously checked and saved.
- Un-highlighted words are those which the platform interprets are known to the user.

If a word highlighted in blue is ignored, once the page is flipped, the platform incorporates it into the user's list of Known Words.

In LingQ, learners develop their receptive skills through meaningful input, because it has been chosen by them based on their interests and preferences. Although the platform advises beginners to start with the guided courses and the mini-stories, no fixed plan is laid out for them to work on these skills. One day they can concentrate on reading a newspaper article about a current issue and the next they may move on to watching the subtitled trailer of a film and read the transcript afterwards.

Regarding interaction and productive skills, LingQ provides learners with different ways to practice their output:

- Booking individual conversation lessons with a tutor via Skype. This is a paying option. The platform offers several tutors of different origins and accents and users can choose among them to have a lesson. Lessons can be 30, 45, 60, or 90 minutes long.
- Contacting other users through the forum to arrange online meetings for communicative exchange.
- Writing a text and submitting it to a tutor (paying option) or uploading it to the platform community to have it corrected by other users (free of charge). If this option is chosen ("Writing exchange"), submitted texts have a limit of 200 words. In any case, there are no set topics for writing. Users decide what they want to write about.

As for the submission of texts for correction, before uploading them, the platform provides a tool to check spelling. It is important to note that this tool just highlights the words that contain mistakes without showing the right form.

Concerning the native language of the users who correct submitted texts, although it is generally understood that only native speakers should do it, there are no restrictions. Once the text has been uploaded to the platform, it is public and availa-

ble for the community to correct. Sometimes the same text is corrected by different users. In my experience, these corrections are received in a matter of hours.

Figure 9 *Peer-correction of writing task*
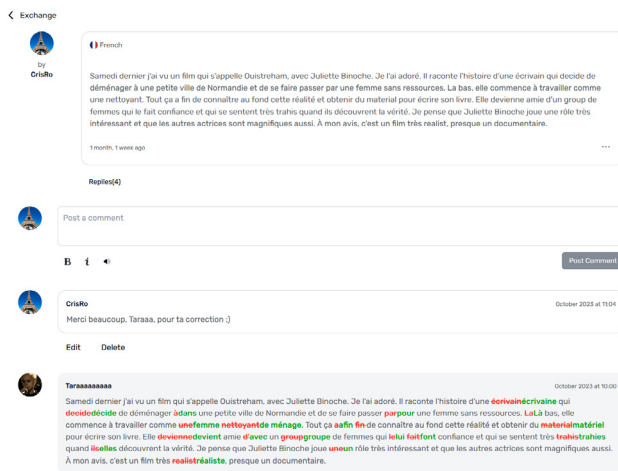
Source: LingQ.

As shown in Figure 9, corrections consist of adding or deleting information to the original text. Some users add clarification for their corrections, but not as a rule (Figure 10).
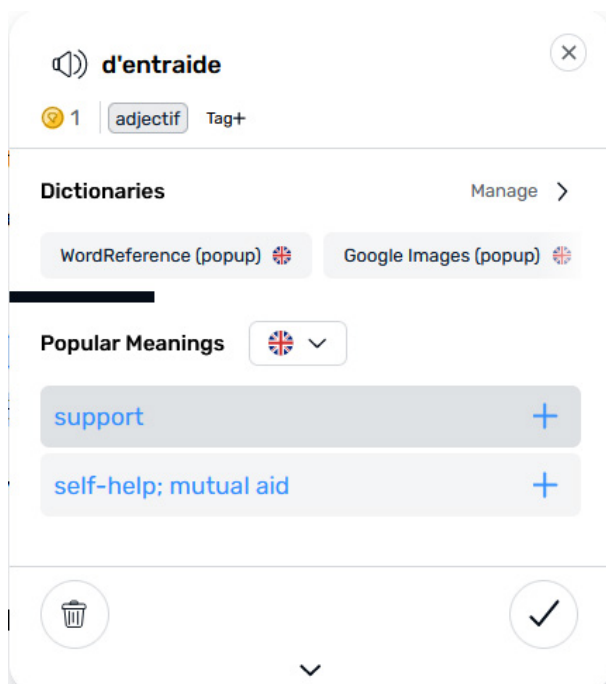
Figure 10 *Clarification of correction in writing exchange*

Source: LingQ.

Going through the writing exchange section allows learners to check the corrections made to the texts of other learners and learn from their mistakes.

Vocabulary

For LingQ, the more words learners know, the higher their potential in a language. As previously explained, when users click on a word (or a phrase) and select a specific meaning to save it to their own vocabulary list, a LingQ is created. The platform encourages users to create as many as possible, keeping in mind that, in the free version, the limit is 20 LingQs in total.

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Figure 11 *Pop-up window opened when clicking a word*

Source: LingQ.

As shown in Figure 11, "*d'entraide*" is the word I clicked on in the lesson I was reading. In the pop-up window (LingQ widget), it is possible to listen to its pronunciation as well as see the tags allocated by the platform, edit them and add our own (Figure 11). Regarding the meaning of the word, these are the options:

a. Click on any of the dictionaries provided, which have been previously selected in the Settings section, among different options. The languages of the dictionaries can

be selected, so it is possible to get monolingual and/or bilingual translations and definitions. When users click on a dictionary, another pop-up window takes them to that entry in the selected dictionary. This option only shows the meaning but does not allow to save it.

b. Check the "Popular meanings", i.e. the translations and definitions other users have supplied for this word (here the language can also be selected). Once the meaning which best suits the context in which the word is set has been selected, the user clicks on it to save it. It is possible to save more than one meaning in the same or in different languages.

c. Type their own meaning.

Saved meanings are not definitive; they can be edited afterwards.

In the "Vocabulary" section users can find the list of all their LingQs (Figure 12).

Figure 12 *Layout of the Vocabulary section*

Source: LingQ.

Each entry includes its meaning (it can be more than one in any of the selected languages), tags, as well as its "Source", i.e. the fragment of the sentence in which the word was integrated when clicked on. Although this source text provides each entry with

some context, it is not always enough to retrieve the meaning, as will be analyzed later on.

In the "Status" column, the entry shows a number which goes from 1-4, depending on its degree of consolidation in the user's memory. As the Help page explains: "LingQs start with status 1 (unfamiliar); as you become more familiar with the word, increase its status. If you get the word correct twice in a row during review exercises, the status will automatically increase by 1" (LingQ, 2023a). When the status shows a tick, it means that the word has become known.

Although Google Images is available among the integrated dictionaries when a word is clicked on to check its meaning, unfortunately for visual learners, images cannot be saved into their LingQ entries.

Vocabulary which has not been found in the "lessons studied" (i.e. texts read in the platform) can be manually imported into LingQ. The only disadvantage is that these entries are not saved with a source text.

The vocabulary section provides a "Review" function to revise the saved vocabulary through cards with the option of doing it through the Spaced Repetition System (SRS). As one of LingQ's help videos explains, this system "presents newer words and lower-status words more frequently. LingQs that were saved a long time ago, LingQs that were recently reviewed and LingQs that are closer to being known will be shown less frequently" (2022a). In Settings, users indicate how many cards they want to practice in each review session. Each word/phrase is reviewed twice in a session in shuffled order through different types of activities. There are five types of review activities:

- Flashcard: It requires learners to provide the meaning of a word or phrase. The source text is shown for support.

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- Reverse flashcard (how would you say this in the target language?). It shows the meaning and learners have to guess what the word is in their target language.
- Cloze test.
- Dictation.
- Multiple choice to select the right meaning.

In the vocabulary practice, the source text associated with the term is key in the resolution of the flashcards and the cloze tests (as seen in Figure 13). In the rest of the activities, the source text is shown in the feedback.

Figure 13 *Source text as a prompt in cloze tests*

Source: LingQ.

Therefore, the repetition of these activities contributes to reinforcing the mental connection between the two. In addition, during revision sessions, the same term is tested twice through different techniques. This is, halfway through the session, the same set of terms is revised again in scrambled order. Knowing that the solution lies in a term that has previously come up reduces the learner's cognitive effort to retrieve the correct answer. Thus, the probabilities of providing the correct answer rise, as well as the learner's motivation.

If the "Sentence view" option is chosen, users will also have the possibility of revising the vocabulary and structure of a sentence through two types of activities:

- A matching exercise between words and their translation.
- An aided reverse translation (see more detail in "Grammar").

During vocabulary revision, the feedback of each exercise card shows an edition icon that allows users to optimize the saved information about each term. Thus, if some relevant information is lacking (e.g., that it is feminine or plural) or a more accurate translation/definition is needed, they can edit it. From the "Edition view" it is also possible to have access to other examples of the same term in other contexts that other users have saved. A click on any of them leads to the text (lesson) in which the user LingQed it.

At the end of each lesson, there is a tick to indicate users they have finished reading the text. The moment they click on it they are provided with the following feedback: known words added, LingQs created, following lessons (in the same course) and recommended lessons. They are also given the option of reviewing its vocabulary through the same type of exercises described before.

Grammar

Given the fact that Kaufmann considers it "a distraction from learning the language" (2003, p.121), there is not an explicit approach to grammar. For LingQ, it is through extensive and intensive reading and listening that we contribute to building a metalinguistic awareness; in Krashen's words, a "feel for grammaticality" (1981, p.4). Therefore, it is worth analyzing from a grammatical perspective some of the input provided by the platform. Let's start with the input specifically designed by LingQ, i.e., the mini-stories and some of the guided courses (mainly those addressed to beginners).

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In the mini-stories, repetition is the main characteristic, transforming the structures from affirmative into negative and then into interrogative, as well as a transition from third to first-person singular (see Figure 14). Regarding the automatisation of structures through repetition, the platform affirms: "Through frequent exposure, it will become more and more permanently lodged in your brain and ready to be used in communication eventually" (LingQ, 2022b).

Figure 14 *Extract of LingQ mini-story for beginners*

3 - Catherine adopte un chat
LingQ Mini Stories - France

Histoire trois: Catherine adopte un chat

Catherine s'ennuie au travail et à la maison.

Elle fait la même chose tous les jours.

Elle veut un nouveau passe-temps.

D'abord, elle essaie de cuisiner.

Mais sa nourriture n'a pas bon goût.

Ensuite, elle essaie de nager.

Mais elle a peur de l'eau.

Catherine rentre à la maison à pieds et voit un magasin d'animaux.

Dans le magasin d'animaux, elle voit un chat !

Catherine achète le chat et est maintenant très heureuse.

Voici la même histoire racontée différemment.

Je m'ennuie au travail et à la maison.

Je fais la même chose tous les jours.

Je veux un nouveau passe-temps.

D'abord, j'essaie de cuisiner.

Mais ma nourriture n'a pas bon goût.

Source: LingQ.

The beginner-guided courses consist of collections of thematic lessons in which learners can find basic dialogues related to everyday situations. The course "Patterns" is an exception

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in that it is organized around words or groups of words that appear frequently in the language, i.e., key verbs, connectors, conjunctions, etc.

Both types of content aim to help learners start noticing and fixing frequently occurring phrases of the target language. Phrases are claimed to be the cornerstone of language acquisition: "I found it easier to learn the structure of a new language from frequent exposure to phrase patterns rather than trying to understand abstract grammatical explanations of that structure". (Kaufmann, 2003, p. 42)

This insistence on the importance of phrases for the acquisition of "correct language" (p.121) clashes with the type of texts sometimes found in the lessons. When they are imported from a YouTube video with subtitles automatically generated, learners instantly perceive that the transcription is very confusing since it follows a word number criterion instead of syntactical criteria to separate the lines. Consequently, what the learner finds is an unpunctuated text with broken sense units/phrases and a lack of coherence (see Figure 15).

Figure 15 *Transcription from a non-subtitled YouTube video*

Conflit au Proche-Orient : la Turquie négocie avec le Hamas • FRANCE 24 - YouTube
FRANCE 24

Conflit au Proche-Orient : la Turquie négocie avec le Hamas • FRANCE 24 - YouTube
alors depuis plusieurs jours on voit des
rassemblements à travers tout le pays à
Istanbul à Ankara et dans différentes
villes de la Turquie on observe des
cortèges assez importants de Turcs venus
montrer leur solidarité au peuple
palestinien avec des pancartes et des
messages du du type la Palestine doit
être libre et l'occupation doit cesser
on a observé aussi des drapeaux
israéliens en feu ou des manifestants
réclamé que l'armée turque interviennent
en renfort à Gaza mais ça ce sont des
comportements qui restent quand même
assez à la marge en réalité ce qui est
surtout exprimé par la major la majorité

Source: LingQ.

As previously explained, when working on a lesson, learners can approach its reading from an intensive point of view analyzing each sentence. They switch to "Sentence view" and then, click on "Revise sentence". One of the revision activities consists of an aided reverse translation of the sentence into the target language, by clicking on the word chunks offered in a bank below (see Figure 16). The problem is that these sometimes do not correspond to sense units, and no syntactic criteria have been applied to split them up.

Figure 16 *Unscramble activity in Revise sentence*

Traduire la phrase

Nathalie Pêcheux, a divorced literature teacher, goes from being a caring mother to a sickly jealous one almost overnight.

Nathalie Pêcheux,	professeure de	lettres divorcée,	passe quasiment
au lendemain	du jour	de mère	attentionnée à	jalouse maladive.

Soumettre ↵

Source: LingQ.

As shown in the example, the word chunks do not reflect sense or syntactic units at times. E.g., "*lettres divorcée*" is not a useful chunk, "*professeure de lettres/ divorcée*" would be more meaningful.

Instead of a syntactic or lexical rationale, chunks are formed following the criteria of the number of words in the sentence. If the sentence is short, chunks will be individual words or two-word chunks. If they are longer, each chunk can be composed of 3, 4, or 5 words (as in Figure 17).

Figure 17 *Chunking in long sentences*

Traduire la phrase

Emmanuel Macron wanted to affirm his deep, intimate solidarity with Israel, right from the start of his trip to the Hebrew state and the Palestinian territories on Tuesday October 24.

Emmanuel Macron souhaitait	affirmer une solidarité	profonde, intime avec
Israël, dès les	premières heures de	son voyage dans	l'Etat hébreu et
	les territoires palestiniens,	

mardi 24 octobre.

Passer

Soumettre ↵

Source: LingQ.

Another aspect that should be noted in this section is the grey-shaded tags that the system automatically provides for every word when clicking on them, which correspond to grammatical categories. They are also clickable, taking us either to the Grammar guide or to a dictionary (if the tag is the verb in its infinitive form, clicking on it takes us to its conjugation). As for the Grammar guide, it is specific for each language, concise and straight to the point. In LingQ's terms[3], looking for grammar rules makes sense when it helps us notice:

Though the LingQ system is designed to help you learn a language without obsessing over technical grammar terms, there

___

3   https://www.lingq.com/en/grammar-resource/french/

comes a time in our French studies when we need to get stuck in to (sic) the rules and quirks of the language. That's where the LingQ French Grammar Guide comes in. (LingQ, n.d.)

Once a LingQ is created, the term cannot be edited. So if the word is plural or feminine it cannot be saved in its unmarked form. The same happens with conjugated verbs. This is because each term is directly associated with its source (context), which cannot be altered. The key is to pay attention to the tags and the saved meanings. Since both can be edited, it is important to make sure they reflect the morphosyntactic characteristics of the word (Figure 18). The attention given to form contributes in this case to the development of a grammatical conscience (noticing).

Figure 18 *Editing tags and meaning*

Note: In this LingQ, I specified the gender adding one tag (white) and indicating it in brackets in the saved meaning.
Source: LingQ.

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Pronunciation

The work on pronunciation is basically receptive: as they read their lessons, learners can click on individual words/phrases to listen to their pronunciation as well as listen to the audio of the whole text. Also, when revising their vocabulary, they can access the pronunciation of the word (both isolated and in their source text) and there is a specific type of exercise, which is the dictation of a word/phrase. This is the only moment in which their phonetic competence is actively required.

In the description of his approach, Kaufmann (2003) encourages learners to notice the pronunciation nuances of their target language, as they listen intensively and practice imitation and repetition to make them stick (p. 43). This type of repetition is different from the "tiring and annoying" (p. 38) drills he recalls from his early experiences of language learning because input in LingQ is provided in context. However, a focus on pronunciation should never interfere with the learner's efforts to communicate: "Learn to be your own toughest pronunciation critic when you are working on it alone, and then forget about it and be relaxed when speaking to others" (p. 125). This is connected to Krashen's views about the optimal monitor user.

Culture

Kaufmann (2003) argues that: "It is important to participate in the culture of a country, in order to be in a state of mind to absorb the language" (p. 64). Being aware of the complexity of the definition of the concept of culture and the limitations of the present study, it should be clarified that, when he refers to culture, he focuses on the cultural features of the different communities of speakers of that language as an official one.

In LingQ, cultural understanding is generally gained through exposure to authentic content in the target language. Each of

the shelves of its library offers opportunities to access cultural aspects linked to the target language, directly or indirectly. Take for example shelves as "News", "Entertainment", "Lifestyle", "Books", or directly "Culture". It should be noted that, in my case, since French is my target language, the country of reference is not just France with its variety of cultures, but those of *La Francophonie*. For example, in the News Feed, it is possible to find sources like Le Monde, France Info, Le Journal de Montréal, and Africa News.

Likewise, the concept of culture in LingQ is very broad and encompasses high and popular culture, or, in Tomalin and Stempleski's terms (1993), "big and little C culture" (pp.6-7). Learners can find an array of content from readers of classical novels to songs, TV programmes or cooking blogs. Examples of such variety for a French intermediate level are: the lyrics of Stromae's song "L'enfer" ("Hell"), a TED Talk entitled "Le bonheur est une question de choix" ("Happiness is a matter of choice"), the "Journal en Français Facile" ("News in Easy French"), "L'Etranger" ("The Stranger") by Albert Camus in chapters, or a vlog on "Comment trouver un appartement au Québec" ("How to find an apartment in Quebec").

The platform will contribute to building intercultural competence if the learner is receptive to integrative motivation. Kaufmann refers to it as part of the attitude needed to be a successful language learner: "The ability to elevate yourself, get above your own culture and deliberately project yourself into the new culture, the desire to want to be part of that culture and to find aspects of that culture that you enjoy" (2019a). If the learner does not have this attitude, the presence of these elements embedded in the input might simply go unnoticed by them.

Finally, it is important to remember that LingQ's library is built by its users, who may be biased as foreign language learners

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when selecting cultural content. Therefore, their approach to searching the web for content might be the result of a reductionist and oversimplified view of the target culture.

DISCUSSION

To answer RQ1 concerning the main theoretical and pedagogical principles of the platform, LingQ is consistent with Krashen's Monitor Theory in many aspects: emphasis on acquisition over learning, the need for immersion in comprehensible and extensive input before concentrating on output and attention to the learners' interests as a way of protecting the affective filter. Also, the insistence on avoiding excessive attention to form in favour of a focus on meaning points, at the optimal monitor user. However, vocabulary practice fosters rote learning, repetition and habit formation, all of them in line with Behaviorism. In addition, content addressed to beginners promotes the acquisition of structural patterns through dialogues in stories.

Furthermore, translation has a specific role in the platform: meanings consist of translations if monolingual dictionaries are not chosen and it is available in the reader tool for whole texts. In flashcards, reverse flashcards and multiple choice activities, if the saved meaning of the term was a translation and not a definition, what learners are required to do is a translation task. It is also present in the sentence view revision exercises. Neither in Behaviorism nor in Krashen's theory was there a place for translation. For Behaviorism, it was regarded as a source of interference and a distraction from the language learning goal. For Krashen, although he does not outright reject the use of translation, he insists on the need to focus on immersive language experiences, where learners are engaged in activities that provide comprehensible input in the target language. So, in this aspect, LingQ, incorporating arguments like those of Cook (2010) or

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Pintado Gutiérrez (2018), moves away from these two theories, reassessing translation as a linguistic resource that should be enabled to learners as pedagogical support.

Regarding Kaufmann's aforementioned "language learning tripod", one of its feet is the importance of time spent with the language. Despite being a self-paced platform, it tries to motivate learners toward building a habit of spending some "quality time" with the target language every day by showing their "Streak", which is the number of consecutive days they have hit their daily goal. Set when signing up, the daily goal consists of earning a certain amount of coins by reading, listening, adding Known Words or increasing the status of their LingQs (either manually or through review exercises). To repair a lost streak, they can use the coins they have accumulated. The more coins the learner earns, the more time they have spent with the language. Creating LingQs is another key way of gaining coins. Each word has a different value depending on their frequency of use: the most common words are more valuable.

Another key "foot" is the ability to notice. When learners click on a word to see its meaning, they must decide whether to save its meaning (by clicking on it and creating a LingQ) or not. They may just check its meaning but not keep the word. This decision is taken based on relevance ("how important do I think it is to include this word on my vocabulary list?"). The transition from blue to yellow highlighting to non-highlighted supports learners' ability to focus on what is important and useful. Another aspect that encourages noticing is switching to sentence mode, which allows learners to break down long and difficult texts into more manageable pieces, lowering the cognitive load and favouring the affective filter.

The need to notice has also been analyzed, not just formal aspects (structures, pronunciation, vocabulary, etc.), but also cultural aspects

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linked to the target language that might not be so evident sometimes. This is related to Kaufmann's third foot of the language learning tripod, "Attitude" and to RQ5, related to LingQ's contribution to the development of intercultural competence.

In terms of the treatment of language components (RQ2), LingQ focuses mainly on vocabulary. For Kaufmann, learning words from meaningful content is the main task of language learning and this is reflected in the platform's powerful tool to save and edit vocabulary. The platform's design invites learners to a process of continuous construction. In my experience, one example is the flexibility of meaning selection when creating LingQs. It can be done in any language and include as many as considered necessary. I started mostly with English translations (and Spanish only a few times) before considering definitions in French. When the French definitions supplied by other users were insufficient or inaccurate, I typed my own meaning (copying and pasting it from one of the monolingual integrated dictionaries available in the platform). The problem with devoting too much time to meaning selection when creating LingQs is that learners may lose the thread of their reading text, slowing them down. It is best to refine this afterwards once the lesson is finished. They click on "Revise lesson", go through all the key vocabulary and edit anything they need.

Another example lies in the realization of the importance of creating LingQs in contexts (source texts) which are really useful to deduce the meaning of the word. If this is not kept in mind, vocabulary revision (especially flashcards and cloze tests) is completely discouraging. In the example in Figure 19, users are required to guess the meaning of "cambrioler" ("to burgle") in the context of the sentence "gens qui viennent vous cambrioler" ("people who come to burgle you"), which gives no support for meaning.

Figure 19 *Lack of context in source text*

What does this word mean?

🔊 **cambrioler**

🔊 ...gens qui viennent vous cambrioler

[infinitif] [verbe]

Flip card   ↵
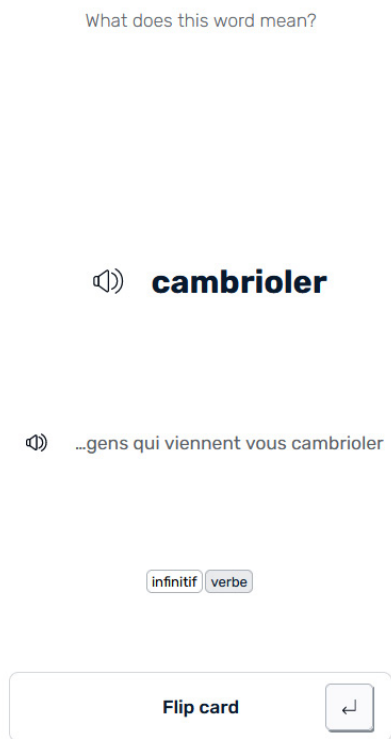
Source: LingQ.

When this problem is spotted, one solution would be to delete the entry on the vocabulary list, find that word in a clearer context, select the text, import it as a lesson, open the lesson, and click on the word to create the LingQ. Although in both examples the refining process and decision-making contribute

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to cognitive retention, it is also dependent on the linguistic and pedagogical expertise of the user.

As considered, from Kaufmann's perspective, reading and listening contribute to the acquisition of knowledge about the language, as Krashen put it: a "feel for grammaticality" (1981, p.4). Although grammar in LingQ is implicitly addressed, it encourages attention to form (noticing) as significant in the learning process so, the type of tasks learners are required to do require implicit and explicit learning.

Regarding RQ3, LingQ is overwhelmingly addressed to reading and listening. One of the strengths of the platform is its multimodality in terms of receptive skills. Although learners are expected to devote time every day to work on all four skills, they can ignore writing and speaking and still achieve their daily goals. However, the use of this platform has enhanced my speaking due to my effort to notice the form to include it in the vocabulary lists. I feel more confident and fluent when participating in conversations in French away from the platform. This approach of attention to form (the importance of conscious reading in significant tasks) as a way to enhance productive skills does not seem so much a contradiction of Krashen's avoidance of form as an extension of his theory.

According to Bączkowska (2021), regarding the learning outcomes, learners in LingQ are not tasked with any activity in which they need to use their creativity. However, I disagree because in their writing tasks learners can choose the topic and approach it in the way they prefer. Also, creativity is encouraged when creating LingQs and adding tags or their own definitions. Users can also create their own lessons and courses, making the platform a versatile tool not just for learning, but also for teaching.

In LingQ, users direct their own learning by searching for the content they are interested in and working from there.

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A frequent source of demotivation in language learning platforms comes from content which learners find unappealing and texts which are disconnected from their interests. In LingQ, learners choose the input they prefer from an infinite pool of possibilities. Although some authors criticize LingQ's lack of a "structured learning path" (Karasimos, 2022), it relies heavily on the user's responsibility to choose the content that is really comprehensible for them (i.e., that poses a real challenge for them in terms of learning). For beginners, the platform offers more adapted and sequenced content (i.e. mini-stories or guided courses). Since this kind of learner might find it challenging to look for content to import, they might prefer a more conventional approach.

Before choosing a lesson, learners see its percentage of new vocabulary and therefore decide what level of comprehensible input they are ready to confront. So, in terms of learner's agency (RQ4), the learner decides what to read, listen, watch, who to speak to, what to write about and how to do it all. They also decide if they want to check the translation or not. In comparison with other PALLs, LingQ is aimed at a more sophisticated and disciplined learner, who has taken responsibility for their learning.

Finally, returning to the platform's contribution to intercultural competence (RQ5), Kaufmann's view on cultural participation in language acquisition aligns with LingQ's approach, offering a wide range of cultural content through authentic material. Nevertheless, the success of this approach is contingent upon the learner's attitude. It depends on the learner's willingness to embrace the new culture. Without this mindset, these cultural insights might remain unappreciated. Additionally, LingQ's user-curated library may present a limited view of the target culture, influenced by learners' perspectives and expectations.

In light of the limitations outlined in the methodology with regard to the numerous variables that could potentially influence

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the user experience in different ways, it appears reasonable to align them with some of the aspects addressed in this section, specifically the ability to notice, the cultural sensibility, the time spent on the platform, or the digital proficiency to address the platform's shortcomings. With regard to the aforementioned issue, the lack of intuitiveness in the platform interface may consequently impact the user experience.

CONCLUSIONS

LingQ describes itself as a "choose-your-own-adventure tool" (2023b) in reference to the infinite ways in which users can adapt it to tailor their learning experience. In line with this, the absence of fixed guidelines for sequencing learning, as observed by Karasimos (2022), may be precisely where the distinctive quality of this platform lies, as it allows for a greater degree of autonomy on the part of the learner.

In response to Bączkowska's criticism (2021), this study has demonstrated that the platform has the potential to foster creativity, caters to beginners and facilitates the practice of productive skills, although this latter point is limited in scope.

Bearing in mind that it is mainly focused on receptive skills, the advantages of using the platform for learning new vocabulary through context are numerous. In this case, it is the learner who takes responsibility for finding and "processing" their comprehensible input. They are also encouraged to monitor their own progress through vocabulary practice, translation in context and writing tasks. This is a specific quality that previous general approaches (Liu et al., 2015; Bączkowska, 2021; Karasimos, 2022, etc.) have failed to take into account.

Despite these benefits, the platform might be found wanting in possibilities for communicative interaction. However, LingQ does not claim to cater for the development of these skills,

instead, it fosters "intensive and repetitive exposure to enjoyable language material" (Kaufmann, 2003, p.103).

As a frequent online reader, I usually come across new words and expressions. Regrettably, these often slip from memory or are noted in rarely reviewed notebooks, leading to a regrettable loss. The practice of cataloging and consistently revising this vocabulary through SRS proves beneficial.

Interestingly, using this platform requires no additional effort for learners already engaged in regular reading as a part of their educational process. Signing in does not require daily engagement with sequenced content or grammatical exercises. Any selected reading material inherently transforms into a language-learning lesson. Consequently, LingQ is an excellent springboard for those looking to enhance their communicative competence and language awareness, despite the time commitment demands and focus on literacy.

I hope that this study of a year-long use of the platform with a particular interest in identifying its underlying theoretical principles will offer a more nuanced and updated analysis than previous approaches. Further studies on the platform could examine its possible didactic applications in face-to-face formal environments at different levels. Another interesting line of research would be to perform quantitative analyses that could allow more specific insight into the different features observed in the current study.

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