Learning to Write Japanese using a SNS designed to Develop Writing Proficiency: Affordances and Constraints

Hiromi Nishioka

(hiromi.nishioka@aoni.waseda.jp)

Faculty of Human Sciences, Waseda University, Saitama, Japan

Abstract

Social Networking Sites designed for language learning (SNSLL) provide useful functions to promote language learning. Lang-8, the focus of the discussion in this paper, is a SNSLL designed to develop users' writing proficiency in the target languages. To realise this goal, Lang-8 provides users with native speaker feedback on their writing as well as the capability to interact with them using built-in communication tools. This study examined how seven Korean learners of Japanese perceived and acted on the affordances provided by Lang-8 for language learning. Also examined were the factors inhibiting them from learning Japanese while using the platform, drawing on the concepts of affordances and constraints (van Lier, 2000, 2004). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Korean participants. This study found that the participants perceived and acted on a wide range of affordances including those not observed on other SNS designed for general users. Regarding the factors to inhibit active engagement in learning Japanese while using the platform, this study found that they included insufficient Japanese language proficiency, lack of technology-related knowledge, and affective responses. These findings highlight the importance of providing language learners, particularly those with limited experience in learning a language using SNS, with material, meta-cognitive and affective support to optimise language learning.

1 Introduction

Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Instagram are ubiquitous tools for general users to meet a wide range of daily needs including keeping in touch with family and friends, accessing entertainment and news, sharing information, and documenting one's own life (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Sadowski, Pediaditis, & Townsend, 2017). The platforms are also widely used by university students to use and learn target languages in informal learning contexts (e.g., Al-Jarrah, Talafhah, & Al-Jarrah, 2019; Alm, 2015; Arfiandhani, 2019; Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010).

Despite their popularity and affordances, general SNS may not be the most effective learning platform for all language learners. Low proficiency learners, for instance, often do not have native speaker friends to interact with online (Alm, 2015). Furthermore, because they do not provide line by line correction functions, users of general SNS may not find them convenient for providing language corrections (Dizon, 2016). To resolve these limitations and to promote language learning on the platforms, purposefully designed SNS for Language Learning (SNSLL) such as Lang-8 (https://lang-8.com/)[1] and HelloTalk (https://www.hellotalk.com) are increasingly developed. Lang-8 (https://lang-8.com/) is a SNSLL catering to the development of users' writing proficiency in their target languages. To achieve this goal, the platform includes unique functions such as to option for users: 1) to search for native speakers who are willing to interact with them for language learning,

2) to exchange written messages with them, and 3) to receive line by line feedback from the native speaker on their language use, all for free. The platform appeals to language learners who want to learn a language for free, and to educators who want to encourage out-of-class writing by their learners without increasing their feedback workload.

Given the aforementioned distinctive design of Lang-8, it may encourage learners to engage in language learning differently compared to other general SNS or SNSLL. Despite these potentials, very little is known about language learning via SNSLLs catering to the development of their writing proficiency such as Lang-8. This study integrated Lang-8 into a Japanese composition class at a Korean college to examine the Korean learners' perceptions of using the platform for language learning. Also examined were their learning behaviours drawing on an ecological perspective (van Lier, 2000, 2004). Based on the findings, this study discusses the pedagogical implications around effectively integrating SNS catering to writing proficiency development within a second language writing course.

2   Literature Review

2.1   Language learning on SNS

In response to the widespread use of SNS by students, language educators look to utilise the interactivity provided by SNS to promote language instruction across multiple dimensions including writing (e.g., Dizon, 2015, 2016), reading (Kasuma & Tan, 2019), and listening (e.g., Roth & Suppasetseree, 2016). However, most previous studies have explored how the adoption of general SNS can improve English writing instruction efficiency (e.g., Alberth, 2019; Dizon, 2015, 2016; Shih, 2011). Survey-based research showed a positive association between Facebook-based English writing instructions and the psychological effect on the learner (Albert, 2019; Dizon, 2015). Facebook-based writing is more effective at enhancing user motivation for English writing than paper-based writing (Dizon, 2015). Albert (2019) found that Facebook-based writing improved learners' self-efficacy for English writing, particularly for generating ideas and words to describe their ideas.

Some studies of language learning have explored the impact of Facebook-based writing instructions on the quality of English compositions by learners of English (Dizon, 2016; Shih, 2011). For instance, Shih (2011) required Taiwanese university students to post a short piece written in English on Facebook and to provide feedback on each other's work for 8 weeks. She found that Facebook-based writing activities improved the learners' quality of writing regarding organisation and structure. Dizon's (2016) quasi-experimental study compared the effectiveness of writing activities by Japanese university students over 12 weeks using Facebook (experimental group) or paper (control group). The findings showed that Facebook-based writing was more effective than paper-based writing to develop the students' writing proficiency, although neither group achieved significant gain in lexical richness nor grammatical accuracy. Cho (2015a) examined what long-term active users of Lang-8 (using the platform for 9.6 months on average, logging in at least 3 to 4 times per week) perceived to be the benefits of using the platform to learn a target language. The study reported that the main benefits included the capability to receive native speaker feedback and an increase in their motivation to write more.

2.2   Learning languages through written feedback

Language learners consider teachers' written feedback on their writing as a valuable learning resource (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Leki, 1991). Students consider the written feedback by teachers carefully to facilitate their learning (Leki, 1991) and then try to incorporate it into their writing (Chandler, 2003; Karim & Nassaji, 2020). Teacher feedback can also reduce language errors by students in their writing (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Karim & Nassaji, 2020). Research comparing the effectiveness of direct versus indirect teacher feedback on student written language accuracy found that direct feedback was more effective than indirect feedback for improving students' writing (Beuningen & Kuiken, 2008; Chandler, 2003; Karim & Nassaji, 2020). However, Ferris and Roberts

(2001) found that less explicit feedback such as marking errors with or without code was still effective for helping learners to accurately revise their draft. Language learners also perceive that self-editing based on indirect teacher feedback (e.g., an underline with descriptions) was more effective than receiving direct teacher feedback (Chandler, 2003).

With ongoing developments in SNS, researchers have also investigated the effectiveness of written feedback provided on SNS for general users versus SNSLL (Cho, 2015a, 2015b; Shih, 2011; Wichadee, 2013;). Shih (2011) and Wichadee (2013) incorporated peer feedback into Facebook-based writing activities during English writing classes at universities and analysed the quality of the feedback and its impact on student writing. Wichadee (2013) found that peers often provided feedback related to the content, grammar and language use in the writing rather than on the organisation of the writing. Her study showed that such feedback encourages students to revise their spelling and tense use, as well as to add and remove content in their writing. Findings of both Shih (2011) and Wichadee (2013) showed that peer feedback provided via Facebook is effective for improving the quality of the students' written expression in English. Cho (2015b) examined the quality of feedback provided to voluntary users by native speaker members of Lang-8; that is, the SNSLL designed to develop users' writing proficiency in a target language. The study found that most language errors by users were corrected directly by the native speaker. The author claimed that built-in line by line correction functions may encourage native speakers to correct the errors directly on the platform. Direct corrections are perceived positively by Lang-8 users in terms of helping them to identify errors and learn alternative expressions (Cho, 2015a), as well as to motivate them to write more (Cho, 2015a; Pollard, 2015).

2.3   *Affordances and constraints to learning a language using technologies*

The ecological perspective was initially developed by German biologist, Ernst Haeckel (1886). The concept refers to "the totality of relationships of an organism with all other organisms with which it comes into contact" (van Lier, 2000, p. 251). Applying the concept of 'ecology' in language learning research, van Lier (2000) perceived the learner to be "immersed in an environment full of potential meaning" (p. 246) and language learning occurring as he or she "acts and interacts within and with this environment" (van Lier, 2000, p. 246). To further clarify this reciprocal relationship, van Lier (2000, 2004) borrowed the concept of affordance coined by psychologist, James Gibson (1979); namely, "what〔the environment〕offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" (p. 127). Importantly, an affordance is action potential for the organism. Applying the concept in language learning, van Lier (2004) redefined 'an affordance' as the relationship that provides "a match between something in the environment and the learner" (p. 96) and "action potential" (p. 92). Although Gibson (1979) considered an animal's perception of an affordance to be direct and immediate, van Lier asserted that perceiving an affordance directly is not necessarily easy for language learners. In turn, he provides two conditions for perceiving and acting on an affordance for language learning: 1) the learner should actively "interact with the physical and social world" (p. 92), and 2) the learner has "his or her abilities — to promote further action and lead to higher and more successful levels of interaction" (van Lier, 2004, p. 95).

Several recent studies in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) have explored how affordances provided by technologies are perceived and acted on by language learners (e.g., Jin, 2018; Nishioka, 2016; Wrigglesworth & Harvor, 2018). Wrigglesworth and Harvor (2018), for instance, identified four smartphone-based affordances perceived and acted on by Korean learners to learn English both inside and outside of the classroom: 1) communicating with others using English, 2) accessing information, 3) creating content by taking pictures and audio-recordings, and 4) listening, viewing and reading online English resources. Jin (2016) integrated WeChat, a major SNS among Chinese users, into a seven-week study abroad programme to examine how a low proficient learner of Chinese perceived and acted on the affordances of the programme for learning Chinese in informal learning contexts. The findings showed that the learner acted on the affordances of the multimodal resources in a tactical way such as using stickers and video clips to: 1) maintain on-going

interactions with native speakers despite limited Chinese proficiency, and 2) present one's identity as a competent Chinese user. My early study (Nishioka, 2016) examined the factors inhibiting Korean learners of Japanese from acting on affordances provided by Web 2.0. The study revealed several inhibition factors including their reluctance to interact with strangers, insufficient knowledge of Japanese and online resources, and lack of Japanese acquaintances to interact with online. Similarly, Lai and Gu (2011) also identified several factors to discourage Hong Kong university students from using technologies in self-regulated contexts. They include lack of knowledge about the target language and online resources for language learning. They also found that the students were reluctant to interact with native speaker strangers due to their lack of language proficiency and shared topic and feeling uncomfortable about interacting with strangers. Thus, the findings suggest that learner-related factors mediate how and to what extent learners perceive and act on affordances provided by technologies for language learning.

The present study integrated Lang-8 into a Japanese composition class at a Korean college to examine how Korean learners of Japanese perceived and acted its affordances for learning Japanese. Given Lang-8's unique design focus on developing writing proficiency in the target language, users may perceive and act on different types of affordances not identified by previous studies of other Web 2.0 technologies. However, the affordances provided by SNSLL catering to the development of user writing proficiency have been scantly explored in empirical research. To fill the gap and to develop pedagogical supports for language learning using such SNSLL, this study addresses the following two questions:

RQ1. How do Korean learners of Japanese perceive and act on the affordances provided by Lang-8 for language learning?

RQ2. What factors discourage Korean learners of Japanese from perceiving and acting on the affordances for learning Japanese provided on the platform?

3   Methodology

3.1   The project

This study implemented a Lang-8 project in a Japanese writing class (second semester subject for first-year students) taught by the researcher at a two-year college in South Korea. The class consisted of students with Japanese language proficiency levels ranging from beginner to advanced, as the research site implements a mixed-level class policy. The teaching aim for the composition class was to develop the students' capabilities to communicate clearly using basic written Japanese. The course consisted of two teaching components: 1) instructions and writing activities based on a commercial Japanese composition book[2], and 2) Lang-8-based learning activities. The main class activities were conducted using the textbooks; practising writing a wide range of topic using basic Japanese writing structures and expressions introduced by the textbook. To encourage students to write while outside of the classroom, the researcher implemented a Lang-8 project and set homework activities.

Table 1 describes the overall structure of the Lang-8 project. Step-by-step instructions were provided during the lesson along with hands-on activities to guide learners with limited experience in using Lang-8 for target language writing. The weekly homework assigned to the participants over a 10-week period was to: 1) write 'five-line' diary entries, 2) upload the diary entries to Lang-8 and receive feedback from Lang-8 members, and 3) share screenshots of their Lang-8 posts, along with the feedback, in the class blog.

The five-line diary entries started with a thesis statement, followed by three 'reason' sentences, before ending with a conclusion (see Aono, 2015 for an example). This simple and explicit format was adopted to cater to less proficient students. However, advanced level students still benefited from writing the entries by using challenging vocabulary and grammar. Some students completed their entries by voluntarily writing more than five lines or by modifying the paragraph structures (see Appendix 1 for a sample post by a high-intermediate level learner).

Table 1. Project stages by the week

Weeks	Project-related learning activities in class	Project-related homework	Data collection
1	Introduced how to write a five-line diary entry Practiced writing a five-line diary entry	–	–
2	Introduced the benefits of using Lang-8 for language learning (e.g., opportunities to learn Japanese outside the classroom and to receive feedback from native speakers for free) Set up profile page and write a self-introduction	Uploaded self-introduction in Lang-8	–
3	Introduced how to upload a diary entry to Lang-8 Practised uploading a five-line diary entry to Lang-8 Introduced how to socialise with Japanese native speakers (e.g., send a friend request, write comments, click the thank you icon, send personal messages)	Uploaded a screenshot of participants' posts to the class blog after receiving feedback from Japanese native speakers (weeks 3–12)	Collected screenshots of participants' posts to Lang-8
4	Introduced the benefits of providing feedback to others Practised providing feedback to other Lang-8 users		
5–12	–		
13 onwards	–	–	Semi-structured interviews

(Note: In-class activities covered only the basic functions of Lang-8 addressed in this Table)

3.2 Participants

This study recruited seven first-year college students (aged 18–20s) among 21 students enrolled in a Japanese composition class at a two-year technical college in South Korea. Participation in this study was voluntary, and the researcher recruited participants who would consent to being interviewed. The participants completed approximately 120 hours of Japanese instruction at the college. The Table 2 below summarises the participants' demographic details.

Table 2. Demographic details of participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Sex	Learning experiences			Japanese proficiency levels		Language used for the interview
		High school	College (120 hrs)	Informal contexts	JLPT level passed officially	Proficiency level as assessed by researcher-teacher	
Teyoung	M	Yes	Yes	Japanese online games & novels	N1 level (the most advanced level)	Advanced level Reads Japanese novels	Japanese
Dong-u	M	Yes	Yes	–	N2 lvel (high-intermediate)	High-intermediate level	Japanese
Helen	F	Yes	Yes	Japanese anime	No proficiency level record	Proficient enough in speaking and listening to participate in an interview in Japanese	Japanese
Ungi	M	Yes	Yes	Japanese anime & online games	No proficiency level record	Proficient in listening, but not in speaking; replied in Korean when asked in Japanese	Japanese & Korean
Jun	M	Yes	Yes	Japanese anime & online games	No proficiency level record	Proficient enough in speaking and listening to participate in an interview in Japanese	Japanese
Hyoung-u	M	No	Yes	–	No proficiency level record	Beginner level. Difficulties in communicating in Japanese	Korean
Sanjin	M	No	Yes	–	No proficiency level record	Beginner level. Difficulties in communicating in Japanese	Korean

Although the participants received basic instructions for typing in Japanese during semester one, their proficiency in typing in Japanese was divergent depending on their voluntary typing practices outside of the classroom. None of them had used SNS for language learning prior to this project.

As shown, their Japanese proficiency levels ranged from 'beginner' to 'advanced', with the latter having passed the highest level in the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT). Regarding the participants who had not taken the JLPT exams, their proficiency levels were indicated based on the researcher-teacher's observations as a Japanese language teacher. This study recruited participants representing a wide range of proficiency levels due to the broader student population in the class. However, the researcher believes that recruiting participants with divergent profiles helped this study to identify their diverse perceptions of Lang-8 and their learning experiences during its use.

3.3 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the seven participants to elicit their perceptions of using Lang-8 to learn Japanese. The duration of each interview was 30–60 minutes. The researcher anticipated that some participants may feel motivated to use the interview as an opportunity to practise their target language with the Japanese native speaker researcher. Therefore, the researcher, who is a native speaker of Japanese and an advanced user of Korean, made the decision to interview them using their preferred language; namely, either Japanese or Korean. The participants were interviewed about their learning experiences when using the platform, their perceived learning outcomes, and the challenges they encountered during the project. All recorded interview data were then transcribed by the researcher for in-depth analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted by coding the transcribed data following a theoretically-informed and deductive process (Boeije, 2010; Jin, 2019). Specifically, van Lier's (2000, 2004) ecological perspective was adopted as a theoretical framework. Therefore, prior to coding the data, the researcher carefully read all transcriptions and highlighted any segments relevant to 'affordance' and 'constraints' to learning Japanese using Lang-8. To facilitate a systematic coding of data, this study adopted NVivo, a quality analysis software. The researcher used the software to conduct three coding steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Boeije, 2010). Table 3 provides an example of the coding process consisting of three coding steps, presented chronologically from left to right.

Table 3. Coding process in three steps

Segments of transcription	Step 1. Open coding	Step 2. Axial coding	Step 3. Selective coding
Researcher: Using Lang-8, you can develop social networks with Japanese native speakers. Why didn't you use the function? **Sanjin:** As my Japanese was not enough. Even I contact them, I think I cannot communicate with them due to my limited Japanese. *Segment 1*	My Japanese is not fluent enough to socialise with Japanese native speakers *Open coding category 1*	Lack of Japanese proficiency	Insufficient abilities to act on the affordances for language learning
Dong-u: Sometimes I don't understand (feedback in Japanese). **Researcher:** What do you do if you don't understand it? **Donug-u:** I ignore them if I cannot understand. *Segment 2*	I ignore feedback including unknown Japanese words *Open coding category 2*		

The analysis started with open coding, which involved dividing the transcription into segments so that each segment is attributed a theme: affordance or constraint, to learning Japanese using Lang-8. While reading each relevant segment, the researcher used NVivo to generate a category to summarise its core theoretical meaning. For example, a category was created by summarising the core meaning in Segment 1 as 'My Japanese is not fluent enough to socialise with Japanese native speakers' (open coding category 1). Segments including the same core meaning were placed under the same category.

The second step in the analysis was axial coding, which consists in developing upper coding categories by integrating several open coding categories sharing similar core theoretical meanings. For example, an axial coding category developed by this research was 'Lack of Japanese proficiency' by integrating open coding categories 1 and 2. This indicated that a lack of Japanese proficiency inhibited the participants to act on the affordances for language learning provided by Lang-8.

The final step in the analysis was selective coding, in order to systematically identify the core categories related to the coding categories emergent from the earlier axial coding, and to reassemble the categories to answer the research questions. For example, to answer the research questions, 'What factors discourage Korean learners of Japanese from learning Japanese on the Lang-8 platform?', and to connect similar coding categories emergent from the axial coding, the researcher developed the upper coding category, 'Insufficient abilities to use the affordance for language learning'.

In this project, the entire coding process was accomplished by the researcher alone, who conducted this study to reflect on her teaching practices. In addition, the research project initially commenced without the financial resources to hire a research assistant as a second coder. However, to enhance coding reliability, the following three strategies were adopted: 1) careful reading of each segment per coding category to confirm whether each segment is appropriately coded, 2) reviewing the coding results several times over time intervals, and (3) making appropriate revisions if a better coding category is identified.

4 Findings

This study identified four major affordances and constraints related to using Lang-8 for learning Japanese as summarized in Figure 1.
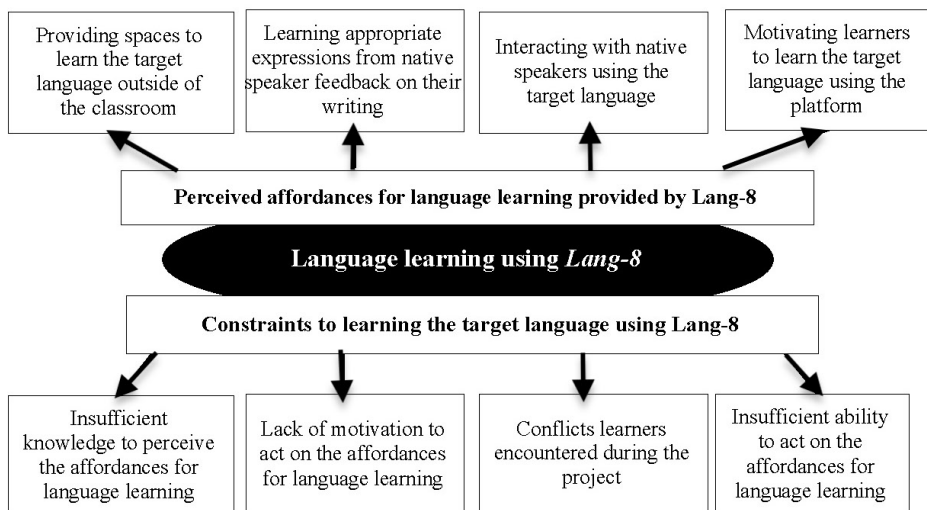

Fig. 1. Perceived affordances and constraints to learning Japanese using Lang-8

The following subsections report on the findings related to the affordances of Lang-8 perceived and acted on by the participants to promote language learning (in §4.1) and the findings regarding the factors perceived by the participants to discourage them from using Lang-8 to learn Japanese (in §4.2

4.1 Perceived affordances of using Lang-8 to learn Japanese

This study identified four major affordances related to using Lang-8 for language learning as perceived by the participants: 1) provide spaces to learn Japanese outside of the classroom, 2) learn appropriate expressions from native speaker feedback on their writing, 3) interact with Japanese native speakers, and 4) motivates learners to learn Japanese.

4.1.1 An affordance to provide spaces to learn Japanese outside the classroom

Lang-8 was perceived by the participants to provide spaces to learn Japanese in out-of-class contexts. This affordance was reported by five participants for a total of seven times. For example, Doug-u pointed out that learners who dislike studying with books can use Lang-8 as an alternative approach to learning Japanese; namely, learning Japanese using a computer. For Helen, an affordance of Lang-8 is the flexibility to practise writing Japanese at times most convenient to her. Acting on the affordance, during the project Helen voluntarily wrote and uploaded her diary entries at a time convenient to her in addition to her weekly assignments. Thus, Lang-8 promotes out-of-class language learning by providing users with a space to engage in learning the target language within their preferred learning conditions.

4.1.2 An affordance to learn appropriate expressions from native speaker feedback

The participants perceived the affordance to learn appropriate Japanese expressions from native speaker feedback on their writing. This affordance was mentioned by all participants for a total of 20 times, most frequently during interviews. For example, Helen stressed that she needed to receive feedback to learn appropriate Japanese expressions, stating; "I cannot know what is wrong in Japanese unless I receive feedback (from the native speakers)". Moreover, Sanjin and Ungi reported that they used native speaker feedback strategically to enhance Japanese language learning efficiency. Sanjin, for example, consolidated his grammatical and lexical knowledge by reviewing both the corrections from the Lang-8 members and the Japanese textbooks. Ungi intentionally wrote diary entries using longer and more complicated Japanese sentences to elicit additional feedback from the native speakers. He explained that the positive outcome of this strategy was to increase the amount of native speaker feedback he received on his writing along with the number of opportunities to learn appropriate Japanese expressions from the feedback.

4.1.3 An affordance to interact with the native speakers

To extend the learning opportunities beyond passively receiving feedback, the participants acted on the affordance to interact with Japanese native speakers using built-in communication tools. This affordance was identified by three participants for a total of seven times. They reported using the following four strategies to increase the level of their interactions: 1) leaving comments (two references), 2) asking questions about the corrections provided (two references), 3) registering friends (two reference), and 4) correcting compositions written by Japanese native speakers who have corrected their writing (one reference). In particular, Ungi demonstrated his strategic use of the comment function to elicit quality feedback from native speakers. He used the function to request Japanese members to clarify "whether or not this part is error" or to provide him alternative Japanese

expressions. Ungi's proactive use of the affordance enabled him to elicit more personalised and detailed feedback from native speaker members.

4.1.4   An affordance to enhance motivation for language learning

The affordance to enhance learner motivation for language learning was referred to by six participants for a total of 14 times. For instance, four participants listed 'interactions with audience' as a source of motivation for them to write in Japanese more often (five references). As illustrative examples, Hyoung-u explained that the feedback motivated him to improve his Japanese writing by prompting him to reflect on his limited Japanese proficiency. For Teyoung and Helen, writing for Lang-8 native speaker members was a source of motivation to write in Japanese. Teyoung indicated that he feels "powerless" when writing without a potential reader, but motivated to improve his efforts when writing for potential readers such as reading back his writing to identify his Japanese errors. Helen found herself more motivated to write for Lang-8 members than for her Japanese teacher by as she perceived the native speaker members as an audience who "chose (to read her diaries) among many diaries" with a genuine interest. Thus, the affordance of Lang-8 to provide interactions with native speakers and authentic readers enhanced the participants' motivation to use the platform for language learning.

4.2   Constraints to learning language using Lang-8

Notwithstanding the Korean participants' perceived affordances of Lang-8 for language learning, they also identified the following four constraints to discourage them from learning Japanese efficiently when using the platform: 1) insufficient knowledge to perceive the affordances for learning, 2) lack of motivation to act on the affordances, 3) conflicts encountered during the project, and 4) insufficient ability to act on the affordances for language learning.

4.2.1   Insufficient knowledge to perceive the affordances for language learning

Insufficient knowledge to realise the affordances of Lang-8 for language learning was discussed by all seven participants for a total of 20 times. The knowledge insufficiencies were around two areas: 1) websites that learners can use for language learning, and 2) limited conceptualisations of language learning.

1) Insufficient knowledge of websites. Prior to this project, the participants did not perceive or act on the affordances for language learning provided by websites such as Lang-8 due to their insufficient knowledge of such websites. This factor was mentioned by five participants for a total of eight times where they described the difficulties around trying to locate websites designed for language learning. For example, Ungi did not look for such websites prior to this project because he had neither heard of the websites nor thought about searching for them. Helen, who was proficient in speaking but not in reading Japanese, did not look for such websites because she found it difficult to understand the content written in 'kanji' (Chinese characters). Moreover, Ungi pointed to a drawback of searching websites for language learning via commercially-oriented Korean search engines such as Naver (https://www.naver.com) and Daum (https://www.daum.net/); prioritising to indicate advertisements rather than websites for language learning. Thus, the findings suggest that learners' language proficiency and knowledge of search engines may significantly affect their capability to locate useful websites for self-regulated language learning.

2) Limited conceptions of language learning. The participants had developed only limited conceptualisations of language learning due to prior book-focused study experiences. Their conceptualisations consequently inhibited them from perceiving and acting on the affordances of Lang-8 for language learning. This factor was mentioned by four participants. For example, Dong-u explained how his book-focused learning experience prevented him from using computers for language learning. He stating, "I have never thought about learning Japanese using computers. I always think (that

a resource for language learning is) only books". As seen in his comment, a learner's prior learning experiences are a powerful driver of their perceptions of the affordances for language learning offered by different language learning tools.

4.2.2   Lack of motivation to act on the affordances for language learning

Some Korean participants did not act on the affordances provided by Lang-8 for language learning due to a lack of motivation to do so. Six participants commented on this factor for a total of 17 times. The main subcategories of this factor included lack of motivation to: 1) learn Japanese using Lang-8, and 2) socialise with Japanese members.

1) Lack of motivation to learn Japanese with Lang-8
Acting on the affordance of Lang-8 for language learning, the participants could further extend their opportunities for out-of-class language learning. Nonetheless, their lack of motivation to learn Japanese using Lang-8 inhibited them from acting on the affordances. As a result, they only met (rather than went beyond) the stated course requirements; namely, writing a weekly diary entry and receiving native speaker feedback. This factor was mentioned by five participants for a total of five times. For example, Teyoung spent a considerable amount of his leisure time reading Japanese novels. However, he was not motivated to learn Japanese using Lang-8 beyond the minimal level, spending only 10 minutes per week on the platform to complete his weekly assignment. The findings suggest that even motivated learners chose not to act on the affordance provided by Lang-8 unless they are motivated to do so to extend their out-of-class learning opportunities.

2) Lack of motivation to socialise with Japanese members
Lang-8 provides the affordance to socialise with the native speakers using multiple communication tools such as personal messages. By acting on this affordance, the participants could extend their opportunities to learn and use Japanese beyond passively learning from native speaker feedback. Nonetheless, some participants chose not to act on the affordance due to lack of motivation to do so. For example, Jun did not feel the need to socialise with Japanese members as he could still receive feedback without having to do so. Hyoung-u did not socialise with Japanese members because he did not have the "mental space (to socialise with Japanese using Lang-8)" due to his hectic daily schedule. Thus, learners, who are unmotivated to socialise with Japanese members on Lang-8 may limit themselves to learning Japanese only from feedback.

4.2.3   Conflicts learners have encountered during the project

The participants identified two types of conflicts during the project which discouraged them from using Lang-8 beyond the minimum course requirement: 1) conflicting beliefs about effective language learning and the perceived affordances of Lang-8, and 2) conflicting perceptions of the platform and the affordances it provided. This factor was mentioned by three participants for a total of five times.

1) Conflicting beliefs about effective language learning and the perceived affordances of Lang-8. Some participants felt discouraged to use Lang-8 beyond their homework activities due to conflicting beliefs about effective language learning and the perceived affordances of Lang-8. The conflict is a result of their belief in the superiority of their preferred language learning method. Two participants mentioned this factor for a total of four times. For example, Teyoung preferred to learn Japanese by reading Japanese novels rather than using Lang-8. He asserted that Japanese book have the advantage of helping him to remember vocabulary and grammar compared to Lang-8. Hyoung-u felt that as a beginner learner there were greater learning benefits from language feedback provided by Korean teachers in Korean rather than Japanese feedback provided by Japanese members of Lang-8. As a result, he used Lang-8 to complete the weekly assignment only. Thus, the findings

suggest the importance of ensuring an alignment between learner beliefs about effective language learning and their perceptions of the affordances of Lang-8.

2) Conflicting perceptions of the platform and the affordances provided by Lang-8. Conflict between the participant's perceptions of Lang-8 and its affordances discouraged them from using Lang-8 beyond the course requirements. This factor was mentioned by Dong-u only. He claimed that he could increase interactions with native speakers by acting on the affordances to socialise with Japanese members. However, he chose to use Lang-8 to complete weekly homework only; that is, to receive feedback. As he stated, Lang-8 is a platform for "study rather than making friends". In other words, the participants may use Lang-8 in a peripheral way only as their perception of the platform is not in alignment with the affordances it provides.

4.2.4 *Insufficient abilities to act on the affordances for language learning*

A perceived inability in three areas inhibited the participants from acting on the affordances provided by Lang-8 for language learning: 1) Japanese language proficiency, 2) online social skills, and 3) Japanese typing proficiency. Six participants listed these factors for a total of 9 times.

1) Limited Japanese proficiency. Self-perceived limitations in Japanese writing proficiency discouraged the participants from using Lang-8 beyond their course requirement. This factor was mentioned by five participants for a total of five times. Participants of different proficiency levels described different contexts in which they felt their Japanese proficiency discouraged them from using the affordances of Lang-8 for language learning. For example, Sanjin, a beginner Japanese learner, did not socialise with Japanese members using the platform because he found it difficult to communicate with them. The challenge for Dong-u, who achieved N2 (high-intermediate) on the JLPT, was to understand the feedback including unknown Japanese vocabularies. Although he could understand the vocabulary to some extent by consulting with dictionaries, he rather chose to ignore the incomprehensive feedback. Given the findings, it is important for educators to share strategies with learners to mitigate negative perceptions of language proficiency impacting on learning when using Lang-8.

2) Lack of online social skills. By acting on the affordance for socialisation with the native speakers, the participants can expand Japanese language learning opportunities beyond native speaker feedback. Nonetheless, some learners may choose not to act on the affordances due to their limited online social skills. This factor was pointed out by Teyoung, who achieved N1 (most advanced level) on the JLPT. While using Lang-8, Teyoung was situated in an online community which encouraged members to socialise with the native speakers by providing them language learning functions such as opportunities to leave comments and personal messages. Despite the communication context and his advanced Japanese proficiency, Teyoung still found it challenging at times to socialise with native speakers whom he had never met for sake of language learning. He stated that "it seems difficult to write (some messages in Japanese) to strangers (whom I have never met offline) … as I did not know what I should write to them." The finding suggests the need to provide pedagogical support to develop learners' confidence and skills to socialise with native speaker strangers comfortably and confidently to promote language learning online.

3) Limited Japanese typing proficiency. Japanese typing proficiency is an important skill required to navigate Japanese websites (Morofushi & Pasfield-Neofitou, 2012). This study found that a lack of typing proficiency may inhibit some participants from using Lang-8 beyond the course requirements. This factor was suggested by Ungi who is very proficient in typing Korean. For him, typing Korean is easier than writing Korean. Despite his strong typing proficiency, he struggled to develop typing proficiency in Japanese due to the different input system used in Japanese compared to Korean. Reflecting on his struggles, he anticipated that fellow Korean learners of Japanese would hesitate to practise writing online, stating that "for learners of Japanese, it is easy to write (compositions on papers) by (using) hand (rather than typing)". Given the time investment required to develop this skill, some Korean learners may choose not to learn Japanese using SNSLL in self-regulated learning contexts to avoid the burden of having to develop their typing proficiency.

5 Discussion

This study found that Lang-8, a SNS designed to develop the writing proficiency of language learners, provided unique affordances that language learners can perceive and act on compared to general user SNS. Similar to previous studies (Jin, 2018; Wrigglesworth & Harvor, 2018), the participants in this study perceived and acted on an affordance to interact with the native speakers; however, they did so by adopting different methods as observed in the previous studies. That is, they interacted with them by commenting on and correcting diary entries uploaded by native speakers who had helped to correct their writing. Research conducted on general users of SNS, however, has reported that the participants acted on the affordance by using multimodal resources provided by WeChat (Jin, 2018), and by accessing online dictionaries and websites via their smartphone (Wrigglesworth & Harvor, 2018). Such different learning behaviours may manifest due to different communication contexts (focusing on correcting language errors versus communicating ideas) and technological settings (interacting via written messages only versus multiple resource formats). What is worthwhile noting here is the strategic action-taking on the affordances to enhance language learning on the SNS. Ungi used the comment function tactically to elicit personalised feedback from Japanese members, whereas a low proficient participant in the Jin (2018) study competently interacted with Chinese members by using multimodal resources tactically. This finding suggests the need to develop the capabilities of learners to use these functions and resources strategically to interact with the native speakers with competently.

This study also found that Lang-8 provides distinctive affordances for language learning not reported by studies conducted on general SNS (Jin, 2018; Wrigglesworth & Harvor, 2018). The affordances include: 1) to learn Japanese outside of the classroom, and 2) to receive written feedback from native speakers. These unique affordances may be perceived and acted on by users due to their course requirement to receive native speaker feedback using Lang-8. In addition, the function on Lang-8 to correct errors line by line with highlighters may encourage users to both perceive and act on the affordances, although SNS for general users do not usually provide such functions (e.g., Dizon, 2016). Given this finding, software designers could integrate functions to provide feedback on SNSLL efficiently to enhance language learning on the platforms.

Despite the above-discussed affordances, this study also found several factors inhibited participants from perceiving and acting on the affordances to engage in learning Japanese using Lang-8. First, lack of Japanese language proficiency discouraged them from extending their learning opportunities by acting on the affordances beyond receiving and learning from native speaker feedback. This supported the finding of Lai and Gu (2011) showing that less proficient learners were hesitant to use online resources for language learning. Despite this finding, educators could potentially motivate less proficient learners to act on the affordance of Lang-8 by advising them to use time gap in asynchronous interactions strategically. That is, to use the time gap to consult unknown words with online resources as well as to formulate their ideas at their own pace.

Moreover, technology-related factors such as typing proficiency and online social skills also discouraged participants from perceiving and acting on Lang-8's affordances to extend language learning beyond their course requirement. Due to a personal struggle to develop typing literacy in Japanese, one participant expressed his concern that learners with low typing literacy may prefer to hand-write in Japanese. This finding highlights the need to provide typing training prior to implementing computer-based learning activities including SNS-based projects. This is particularly important when educators implement projects in low-tech learning contexts where students have learned the target languages using paper-based methods. This study also found that an advanced learner chose not to interact with native speakers beyond receiving feedback due to the lack of a topic to discuss with them. Lai and Gu (2011) reported a similar finding that their participants were reluctant to interact with native speaker strangers due to lack of shared topic with them. As a strategy to develop online social skills, educators can integrate activities requiring learners to analyse how experienced SNS members interact with the native speakers on the platform, including what topics they discuss and how they initiate and sustain the interactions.

Furthermore, affective factors such as low motivation to learn Japanese using Lang-8 also prevented the participants from extending their learning opportunities on Lang-8 by acting on the affordances. This finding contrast with Cho (2015a) who reported the participants' positive perceptions of language learning using Lang-8 as well as positive learning experiences. The findings may differ because both studies recruited participants with different prior learning experiences using Lang-8. Cho (2015a) recruited long-term active users of Lang-8. In turn, their intensive and extensive learning experiences may have allowed them to act on it affordances more effectively. Subsequently, it may enhance their motivation to learn target languages using Lang-8. Conversely, the participants in this study learned Japanese mainly by using textbooks. Due to their book-based learning experiences, some may not have developed a strong motivation to use Lang-8 beyond their course requirements. The findings suggest the need to enhance learner motivation to learn languages using SNSLL in order to encourage their voluntary use of the platforms in self-regulated learning contexts. As one strategy, educators can support learners to construct a personalised learning environment using Lang-8 by choosing: 1) the topic to write on, 2) the genera of writing, 3) when and where they engage in learning, and 4) what questions they ask to native speakers. Such pedagogical support may motivate learners with little or no experience in using SNSLL to act on their affordances for language learning.

Thus, this study expanded the theoretical concept of 'affordances' by applying it to an analysis of language learning using Lang-8, a SNS designed specifically to develop writing proficiency in the target language. The findings show that the participants perceived and acted on the unique affordances of Lang-8 not identified by studies conducted on SNS for general users (Jin, 2018; Wrigglesworth & Harvor, 2018). The findings reported in this study highlight the way in which the platform design and its interaction contexts can impact how learners perceive and act on the affordances the platform provides. Given the rapid developments in technology, emerging technologies may provide learners with new affordances for interactions and language learning. Further studies may reveal how uses of newly emerging technologies can transform the ways that learners engage in language learning by applying an 'ecological' perspective and the concept of 'affordances' in the analysis.

6   Conclusion

Drawing on an ecological perspective, this study examined how Korean learners of Japanese perceive and act on affordances and constraints to learning Japanese using Lang-8, a SNS catering to the development of writing proficiency in the target language. The findings revealed that users perceived and acted on unique affordances not observed in SNS developed for general users (Jin, 2018; Wrigglesworth & Harvor, 2018). They acted on Lang-8's affordances to extend language learning outside of the classroom by receiving native speaker feedback. In particular, some participants strategically acted on the affordance to increase the amount of feedback they received, to elicit personalised feedback, and to enhance their comprehension of the feedback. The findings highlight the pedagogical benefits of integrating SNS-based projects with language courses. Throughout the project, the learners may gain first-hand experiences of the affordances provided by SNSLL and, as a result, may start to use the platforms in self-regulated language learning contexts (e.g., Lai, 2015).

Moreover, the findings reveal that a user's lack of knowledge of the Japanese language and of language learning technology, in addition to affective factors, discouraged them from perceiving and acting on the affordances provided by the language learning platform (i.e., Lang-8). This highlights the need to provide meta-cognitive, technical and affective support to users to enhance their language learning on SNSLL. Such pedagogical support may help them to use the platform confidently and competently to learn target languages. Thus, adopting an ecological perspective and the concepts of 'affordance' and 'constraint' has allowed this study to extend our understanding of the affordances provided by technologies. This was primarily achieved by identifying the unique affordances provided by SNSLL designed to develop writing proficiency.

Despite this contribution, some of the findings need to be interpreted carefully. First, the participants in this study expressed negative perceptions and struggles when using Lang-8 to learn Japanese. This finding may be due to recruiting participants who had previously learned a second language using textbooks. However, further studies may identify a diversity of perceptions and learning experiences using SNSLL by recruiting participants with different learning backgrounds.

Second, the findings reported in this study emerged from one semi-structured interview with each participant at the end of the semester. It may be the case that their perceptions of, and actions on, the affordance of Lang-8 may change as they gain more experience in using the platform and as they develop social networks with Japanese 'friends' on the platform. Given these possibilities, future research could compare how user perceptions of the affordances and learning behaviours might change over time by conducting data collection in multiple learning stages.

Finally, some affordances and constraints discussed in this paper may be inherent to Lang-8 and its distinctive learning design; namely, to develop the writing proficiency of user by receiving native speaker feedback and by exchanging written messages with them. With ongoing advances in technologies, software designers continue to develop and integrate new functions on these language learning platforms. Innovative platform designs and functions may encourage learners to perceive and act on the affordances provided by the technologies using creative approaches not achievable on existing technologies. More research is needed to yield new insights into, and understanding of, the affordances and constraints for language learning provided by newly emerging technologies including SNSLL. An inquiry of this type is imperative to developing pedagogical strategies to optimise out-of-class language learning via the use of such technologies.

Notes

1. At the time of print, registration for Lang-8 had been temporary suspended. Learners can continue to use alternative applications to receive native speaker feedback on their writing such as the Polyglot club (https://polyglotclub.com/) (a 100% free service) and HiNative (https://hinative.com/en-US) (a paid service for language feedback).

2. Some of the activities were taught based on a commercial Japanese composition textbook catering to beginners (those who have studied Japanese up to 200-300 hour lessons only, "Minnano Nihongo Shokyū: Yasashii Sakubun (Japanese for everyone: Easy composition for beginners)" (Kadowaki & Nishima, 1999).

References

Alberth. (2019). Use of Facebook, students' intrinsic motivation to study writing, writing self-efficacy and writing performance. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education, 28*(1), 21–36.

Alhabash, S., & Ma, M. (2017). A tale of four platforms: Motivations and uses of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat among college students? *Social Media + Society*, *January-March,* 1–13.

Al-Jarrah, T. M., Talafhah, R., & Al-Jarrah, J. M. M. (2019). Social networking sites and English language learning: Jordanian EFL learners' practices and experiences. *European Journal of English Language Teaching, 4*(3), 1–36.

Alm, A. (2015). Facebook for informal language learning: Perspectives from tertiary language students. *The EuroCALL Review, 23*(2), 3–18.

Amrhein, H. R., & Nassaji, H. (2010). Written corrective feedback: What do students and teachers prefer and why? *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 13*(2), 95–127.

Aono, C. (2015). *Gurōbaru jidai o ikinuku tame no hābādoshiki ēgo gakushūhō* [Harvard-style English learning method to survive global age]. Tokyo: Nikkē Insatsu Kabushiki Gaisha.

Arfiandhani, P. (2019). The role of social network sites in developing English language skills: Students' voices. *Proceedings of Third International Conference on Sustainable Innovation 2019 – Humanity, Education and Social Sciences (IcoSIHESS 2019), 353,* 83–88. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.2991/icosihess-19.2019.13

Beuningen, C. G., Jong, N. H., & Kuiken, F. (2008). The effect of direct and indirect corrective feedback on L2 learner's written accuracy. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 156*, 279–296.

Boeije, H. (2010). *Analysis in qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications.

Chandler, J. (2003). The efficacy of various kinds of error feedback for improvement in the accuracy and fluency of L2 student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 12*(3), 266–296.

Cho, Y. (2015a). Exploration of a social networking site from L2 learners' perspectives: The case of Lang-8. *Multimedia-Assisted Language Learning, 18*(3), 11–40.

Cho, Y. (2015b). Features of written feedback received in a social networking sites for language learning. 외국학연구, *34*, 99–134.

Dizon, G. (2015). Japanese students' attitudes towards the use of Facebook in the EFL classroom. *The Language Teacher, 39*(5), 9–14.

Dizon, G. (2016). A comparative study of Facebook vs. paper-and-pencil writing to improve L2 writing skills. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 29*(8), 1249–1258.

Ferris, D., & Roberts, B. (2001). Error feedback in L2 writing classes: How explicit does it need to be? *Journal of Second Language Writing, 10*(3), 161–184.

Gibson, J. J. (1979). *The ecological approach to visual perception.* Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.

Jin, L. (2018). Digital affordances on WeChat: Learning Chinese as a second language. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 31*(1–2), 27–52.

Kabilan, M. K., Ahmad, N., & Abidin, M. J. Z. (2010). Facebook: An online environment for learning of English in institutions of higher education? *Internet and Higher Education. 13*, 179–187.

Karim, K., & Nassaji, H. (2020). The revision and transfer effects of direct and indirect comprehensive corrective feedback on ESL students' writing. *Language Teaching Research, 24*(5), 519–539.

Kasuma, S. A. A, & Tan, D. A. L. (2019). ESL reading activities on Facebook among Malaysian university students. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities, 27*(1), 101–121.

Lai, C., & Gu, M. (2011). Self-regulated out-of-class language learning with technology. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 24*(4), 317–335.

Leki, I. (1991). The preferences of ESL students for error correction in college-level writing classes. *Foreign Language Annals, 24*(3), 203–218.

Morofushi, M., & Pasfield-Neofitou, S. (2012). 'Typing literacy' in a Japanese beginner's course: Developing an overlooked skill via explicit instruction and social networking. *Monash University Linguistics Papers, 8*(1), 81–90.

Nishioka, H. (2016). Learning language with Web 2.0 is so difficult!!! Hearing voices of Japanese language learners at a Korean university. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching, 13*(1), 134–149.

Pollard, A. (2015). Web-based journals in the classroom: Motivation and autonomous learning. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 4*(2), 20–31.

Roth, C., & Suppasetseree, S. (2016). Flipped classroom: Can it enhance English listening comprehension for pre-university students in Cambodia? Proceedings of Classic: Learning in and beyond the Classroom: Ubiquity in Foreign Language Education. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313477225_FLIPPED_CLASSROOM_CAN_IT_ENHANCE_ENGLISH_LISTENING_COMPREHENSION_FOR_PRE-UNIVERSITY_STUDENTS_IN_CAMBODIA

Sadowski, C., Pediaditis, M., & Townsend, R. (2017). University students' perceptions of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) in their educational experiences at a regional Australian university. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 33*(5), 77-90.

Shih, R. (2011). Can Web 2.0 technology assist college students in learning English writing? Integrating Facebook and peer assessment with blended learning. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology, 27*(5). 829-845.

van Lier, L. (2000). From input to affordance: Social-interactive learning from an ecological perspective. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 245-259). New York: Oxford University Press.

van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning: A sociocultural perspective*. Norwell, Mass: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Wichadee, S. (2013). Peer feedback on Facebook: The use of social networking websites to develop writing ability of undergraduate students. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, 14*(4). 260-270.

Wrigglesworth, J., & Harvor, F. (2018). Making their own landscape: Smartphones and student designed language learning environments. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 31*(4), 437-458.

Appendix. A sample of student composition with Japanese feedback
The screenshot below shows a diary entry written by Dong-u who has passed N2 (high intermediate level) in the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. I used his composition with his permission.

今日朝起きたらあまりにも寒かったです…"やはり冬が来るのかな?"こんな気がしました。
- ✅ 今日朝起きたらあまりにもとても寒かったです…"やは今もう冬が来るのかな?"こんなそんな気がしました。

[색하기]

> Sentences written by Dong-u

もう新年も1ヵ月しか残っていません・・・今日もこの前のように登山を行きました・・・山の紅葉があまりにも美しくました。
- ✅ もう新年今年も1ヵ月しか残っていません・・・今日もこの前のように行きました・・・山の紅葉があまりにもとても美しくましたかったです。

[색하기]

> Corrections by a Japanese member

しかし、紅葉が落ちる様子を見ていて歳月の恐ろしさも感じられます。
- ✅ しかし、紅葉が落ちる様子を見ていてると、歳月の恐ろしさも感じられます。

[색하기]

"今回の年度内がしておいたのが何?"このような考えがしきりに聞きました。
- ✅ "今回の年度内がしておいたのが何?"このような考えがしきりに聞きました。今年は何をしたのだろうか？このような心の声がしきりに聞こえました。🔲

[색하기]

未来に対する不安感が時間が経つほど近づいています…
- ✅ 未来に対する不安感が時間が経つほど近づいていますーにつれ迫ってきます。

[색하기]

English translation of the above Japanese sentences into English
1. When I woke up in this morning, I felt very cold. I thought that certainly winter is coming.
2. Only one month is left before New Year (comes). Today I did mountain climbing as I did before. Red coloured leaves on the mountain were beautiful.
3. But looking at dropping leaves makes me scared realising time passes so quickly.
4. What I should do within this year? I constantly asked myself.
5. My fear for the future is coming closer as time goes by.