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Chapter 93
Learning Languages in Cyberspace

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ABSTRACT
A great deal of formal and informal language learning and teaching is taking place in cyberspace. A number of theoretically motivated affordances for online language learning point to why this is the case. In the last decade, these affordances have been identified and empirically examined in a number of studies. This entry synthesizes the extant research on these online language education activities and the state of current understanding regarding the potential of teaching and learning languages in cyberspace.

INTRODUCTION
Since the first building-size computers were accessible to language educators, computing power has been harnessed in the service of teaching world languages. The capacity to amass and manipulate target language texts and shape these into interactive routines and sequences for language learners brought a new dimension to the field of language education and gave rise to the subfield, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). This field has been active in design, development and research that seek to understand effective teaching and learning with technologies.

Most recently the advent of online telecommunications in cyberspace has sparked CALL developers and practitioners to integrate this powerful form of teaching and learning into language education. It has moreover spurred researchers to undertake inquiry into the ways in which specific instructional practices support and augment language teaching and learning. Likewise, independent or ‘autonomous language learners’ have historically made use of whatever means at hand to practice and hone the languages they wished to learn. It is not surprising, then, to
find both language educators and independent language learners around the globe making highly productive use of contemporary social media technologies.

Theory and research in applied linguistics and second language acquisition generally, and CALL in particular, align cleanly with the kinds of communicative activity afforded by contemporary internet social connectivity. We know, for example, that while learning an additional language involves complex and multifaceted processes, for most learners these processes are most effective when they entail active comprehension and production of the target language for authentic communicative purposes (Block, 2003; Ellis, 2003; Lightblown & Spada, 2003; Lyster, 2007; Meskill & Anthony, 2007). This fact alone renders social media in cyberspace particularly well suited as a language learning venue. For both formal instruction and informal learning there are multiple affordances attendant to communicating with others while accessing linguistic and cultural resources and these are increasingly being used to support language development. From simple email, chat and newsgroups to more elaborate social media, gaming and knowledge building internet sites, educators and their students have been active users as part of their efforts to teach and learn new languages. Both asynchronous communication formats and synchronous have been employed to provide language learners with opportunities to learn and actively practice the languages they study. Consequently, since its inception and earliest appropriations by world languages education, a number of language and technology theorists have delineated specific affordances inherent in online social media tools and venues that render the medium a powerful one for language teaching and learning. Some of these prominent affordances are:

Ortega (1997):

- Equalizer of participation structures
- Increase in learner output and learner productivity
- Quality of linguistic production

Warschauer (1999):

- Students achieve more written fluency through greater practice of computer-based writing;
- Students benefit from focusing on linguistic structures that written communication provides;
- Students are provided opportunities for expression and reflection

Khalsa et al (2007):

- Authenticity
- Voice
- Equal learning opportunities
- Individual attention
- Freedom of expression
- Convenience and accessibility
- Engagement
- Collaboration
- Technological literacy.

In the context of simulated environments such as MOOs, virtual 3-D worlds, and online games, additional affordances have been suggested.

Sykes, Oskoz & Thorne (2008):

- Simulated identities allow experimentation with, and practice in pragmatic language functions in diverse social contexts and settings
- Students can engage in meaningful language practice in low-risk, face preserving contexts
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• Students develop an emotional connection to the language they use and to language learning more generally, since it allows learners to feel as if they were “really there” (p. 538).

And finally, as regards formal blended and fully online language instruction, additional affordances have recently been outlined specifically for online language educators.

Meskill & Anthony (2010):

• Convenience
• Connectivity
• Membership (playing field is leveled)
• Authentic audiences
• Tailored audiences
• Strategies to compensate for lack of non-verbal info
• Richness of information (links, multimedia)
• Time to focus and review
• Time to compose, resources to compose
• Time and opportunity to reflect
• Opportunity to witness and track learning
• Opportunity to demonstrate learning

As with the broader field of instructional technology, while much attention has been paid to the possibilities inherent in social media contexts for language education with numerous demonstration projects documented, comparatively less has been paid to empirical research that examines the processes and learning outcomes of online teaching and learning practices. In short, while there is much speculative praise for the potential of social media as both supporting and supplying online language learning, empirical evidence is in short supply. Nonetheless, in the following sections we summarize the extant research on both formal and informal language learning and teaching that utilize social networking tools and venues in order to synthesize current understandings regarding the issues and efficacy associated with teaching and learning practices in cyberspace.

OVERVIEW

We define formal language learning environments as those that are institutionally sponsored and sanctioned. Uses of social media for formal language learning environments consist of assigned uses of social media sites in and outside of the classroom with curricular and evaluative consequences. This includes blended learning practices whereby face-to-face seat time is replaced by online teaching and learning activity that involves interactions with others, and fully online language courses driven by social media imperatives (e.g., instructor designed and orchestrated collaborative language learning activities in a fully online format). Informal language learning, on the other hand, takes place in online social media sites such as games, knowledge sharing/building, and other social/informational exchanges. Language learners who seek to practice and hone the language they are in the process of learning seek out native and non-native speakers of that language for online conversation practice. In both environments, evidence is building that suggests that, like in the live classroom and in the target language community, language learning is well supported when those who are interacting are motivated and invested in the process. Evidence is also mounting that point to the above-named affordances as contributing to this learning.

Formal Language Learning Environments

As mentioned earlier, language educators have been quick to appropriate tools and resources in cyberspace to support and enhance their teaching. Productive use has been made of both asynchronous communicative environments and synchronous, each for distinct purposes. For example, when orchestrating instruction asynchronously, both learners and instructors have the advantage of time and resources with which to develop their posts. In this case, instructional activity tends to be more leisurely and responses planned, composed
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and edited. However, in synchronous online language learning, learners must be optimally prepared to use the language under study in real time give and take with the teacher and other students. In each case, the design and orchestration of the instructional activity is key to its success (Meskill & Anthony, 2010).

Two early studies of formal learning using social media technology were conducted with learners of French (Beauvois, 1992, 1998). These exploratory studies examined learners engaged in practicing the French they were using in the traditional f2f classroom via telecommunications. Beauvois’ systematic documentation and observations of student online communication revealed “conversation in slow motion”, that is, students were producing utterances in French that reflected careful consideration of form and meaning, something less likely, less afforded in the live classroom. Also of note in these early studies was a discernable shift to student-centeredness necessitated by asynchronous online communicative practice (Darhower, 2002; Kern, 1995), with reported increases in the quality of student production in the target languages (Blake, 2005; Chun, 1994; Warschauer, 1996; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996). Later studies supply the caveat of the importance of task design and orchestration (Collentine, 2000; Meskill & Anthony, 2005, 2007) in order for this to be the case.

Moving some language course activity online via voice boards, wikis, blogs, or course management tools is increasingly common among language educators. Blended and fully online courses have been particularly successful for teaching heritage language learners whose learning needs differ greatly from those of traditional foreign language learners (Meskill & Anthony, 2008) as well as for non-traditional distance learners (Hampel, 2003). Writing skills and fluency have also been reported to improve as the result of online language learning activities (Chiu, & Savignon, 2006; Eola & Oskoz, 2010; Ishihara, 2007; Lee, 2010; Meunier, 1998; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996) with learners effectively using the target language to manage the online conversations (Chun, 1994), negotiate their instructional processes (Blake, 2000) and extend their use of forms used online to f2f interaction (Sykes, 2005). Language learners also report favorably on the rapport-building that occurs in online language courses (Jiang & Ramsay, 2009) and increases in motivation (Thang & Bidmeshki, 2010), accuracy (Kelm, 1992) and overall learner satisfaction (Strambi & Bouvet, 2003).

As noted earlier (Sykes, Oskoz & Thorne, 2008), online virtual worlds afford a number of interactional opportunities and resources for formal language instruction. In a 2006 study, Peterson determined how task design and orchestration within virtual worlds shapes language learner participation patterns as the target language is used productively (Peterson, 2006). Similarly Zheng et al tracked Chinese learners of English as they interacted in a virtual world as a component of their English instruction with the amount and quality of learner participation far surpassing that of the f2f classroom (Zheng, Young, Wagner & Brewer, 2009). Learners of Spanish participating in language learning tasks in Second Life also reported positive outcomes in terms of rapport and productive language use (Jauregi, Canto, de Graaff, Koenraad & Moonen, 2011) as did Peterson (2010) and Deutschmann et all (2009) in similar studies with learners of English as a foreign language.

Reaching out beyond the immediate learning context to native speakers of the target language, language educators have long set up cultural telecollaborative exchanges. One of the earliest of these, the Orillos Project, paired classrooms in the U.S. and Puerto Rico for language and cultural exchanges to great effect (Cummins & Sayers, 1995). Numerous such exchanges have since been reported (see for example, Belz, 2003; Guth & Helm, 2010; Hauk & Youngs, 2008; Lee, 2009) with the tandem configuration - whereby learners of one another’s languages are other
both teacher and learner to each other - of particular note for the configuration’s potential to raise meta-linguistic awareness (Schwienhorst, 2002), raise awareness of one’s own culture (O’Dowd, 2006), and foster reflective language learning (Vinagre, 2005). Similarly, three studies examining the pedagogical potential of student-generated blogs found that blogging contributes to students’ writing ability in the target language (Bloch, 2007), supports independent management of new cultural knowledge (Ducante & Lomicka, 2005), and helps build intercultural competence (Elola & Oskoz, 2008).

While as preliminary as the technologies utilized, the majority of studies on formal language instruction in cyberspace conclude that instructional design and orchestration remain the central, essential features for successful online teaching and learning. Instructional design and orchestration considerations thus promise to evolve as more language educators develop pedagogically sound practices in new online venues.

**Informal Language Learning Environments**

Those wishing to learn a new language or increase their proficiency in the additional languages they speak find multiple opportunities through online social media. By joining conversations among both native and non-native speakers of the language under study, one can capitalize on the medium’s aforementioned affordances any place on any device at any time through gaming, knowledge building and friendship exchanges. Indeed, a number of academically sponsored websites provide tips and guidance in taking advantage of such social media opportunities for independent language learning (see for example Linguanelt Europa, EnglishBaby!, LiveMocha, etc.). How learners interact with others to improve their language proficiency is a rich vein of research for second language acquisition with a handful of researchers pioneering this strand of inquiry.

Through an online ethnographic investigation of adolescent learners of English, Black (2005) was able to trace language and literacy development as it unfolded in posts to the, anime-based website, fanfiction.net. Language learners actively used the asynchronous features of their online communication to examine the evolution of their language interactions, thereby enhancing their ability to monitor and control their own language learning processes and overall development. With similar focus on evolving digital literacy practices in fan sites, Lankshear and Knobel (2006) investigated the new languages and literacy practices associated with remixing, the practice of combining and manipulating cultural artifacts into a new kind of hybrid. The authors concluded that those types of remixing have arguably become common “writing” practices for a number of ethnically and linguistically diverse youth in online fan communities. Examining the affective aspect of growing up bilingual in the U.S., Lam and Kramsch (2003) undertook a longitudinal case study to illuminate an instance whereby recreational social media saw a young Korean English language learner through the crisis of school failure and discrimination.

Informal online language learning practices clearly carry implications for formal language education. Yi (2005), for example, investigated three Asian adolescent immigrants’ informal literacy practices and the implications for school-based literacy growth. These Asian students were actively engaged in various types of reading and writing in their native language, Korean, and second language, English, in both print- and computer-based contexts. Findings suggest connections between formal and informal literacy learning. Yi also conducted a later case study that explored one Korean high school student’s informal literacy practices outside of school (Yi, 2009). The most notable aspect of the results is the diversity and richness of this emigrant student’s involvement with multiple literacies. This study illustrates that an immigrant student’s new L2 literacy learning from online interactions with peers in contrast to
literacy development in school. Similarly, Lam (2009) observed the many literacy practices in which her case, a Chinese immigrant, engaged that involved the use of both English and her mother tongue.

As part of a larger study examining the influence of popular culture and the internet on heritage language development, Lee (2006) explored the social networking practices of two Korean-American heritage language learners. Employing case studies of her two siblings, the author investigated their linguistic and pragmatic practices. Data suggest that online social venues provided them with authentic opportunities to use the language and to support the development of their online social networks. Online practices enabled them to participate in social interactions without the pressure of spelling words correctly while they were also frustrated because they could not distinguish between correct and incorrect forms of the language. Finally, in a study examining informal language learning in beyond-game communication venues, Ryu (2011) found that gamers using a language other than their mother tongue improved their online communication skills through informal exchanges about the games they were playing.

Clearly there are unlimited opportunities for informal language learning independent of formal institutional structures. Indeed, recent work not only supports this assumption but illustrates how native speakers of the target language are quite willing and able to informally tutor non-native speakers when they make language errors in the online posts (Ryu, in progress), thus affording any number of semi-structured language learning opportunities online. Where we have traditionally considered formal classrooms as the sole venue for language education, the affordances and possibilities are drawing independent language learners to online contexts.

CONCLUSION

Numerous affordances of social media are amenable to both formal language teaching and informal language learning in cyberspace. The mere fact that the world and with all of its languages and cultures is accessible through the internet, compounded by the eminently social features of this accessibility represent a boon for the craft of language instruction and for the motivated, independent learner. Based on the small body of research conducted thus far, it appears that putting these features to good use by taking advantage of the affordances of social media have met with some success. Both formal and informal language learning is being positively supported in terms of learner reading, writing, listening, and speaking ability as well as growth in cultural knowledge and understanding. This suggests that in the near and far future, language education may indeed thrive in cyberspace.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research directions in examining online language teaching and learning include:

- Case study research on exemplary instructional integration of cyberspace affordances
- Longitudinal digital tracking of language development in online environments
- Structured diary studies of informal language learning
• Digital database analyses of informal language learner testimonials
• Discourse analysis of informal instructional conversations between native and non-native speakers.

REFERENCES


**ADDITIONAL READING**

