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Researching Language Learning in the Age of Social Media

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Summary

Along with proliferate uses of the internet for teaching and learning languages has come a broadening and expansion of research approaches to these phenomena. The questions we ask and the ways in which we conceptualize, situate, observe, analyse and make sense of how language learners and instructors make use of social media now draw on a number of techniques and traditions that, until recently, lay outside of the field of applied linguistics and second language acquisition (SLA). Such varied perspectives and approaches serve to enrich our work as language educators in general, and as computer-assisted language learning (CALL) researchers in particular. It is in this spirit of expanding the horizons of possibilities and promises for research in the field that this chapter reviews approaches to examining language teaching and learning with online social media. We review the extant research and divide relevant studies into three categories: research that foregrounds (1) the online environment and its affordances; (2) online social/affective dimensions; or (3) pedagogical processes. Methodological approaches and techniques are highlighted and discussed with an emphasis on the researchers’ foregrounding of the three foci.

Introduction

How language teachers and learners make use of new technologies has been the focus of a great deal of research over the past decade. This is in large part due to the advent and widespread availability of internet-based social media resources and implementations. Further, language teaching in formal, institutional contexts is swiftly moving to blended and online venues with educators seeing positive value in both asynchronous and synchronous forms of target language communication with their students. Online interaction with others – both native and non-native-speaking
classmates and peers – is also widely viewed as authentic language practice with the
greater freedoms social media venues afford for learners to observe and revise target
language reading, writing and speaking (Meskill & Anthony, 2006, 2010; Tudini, 2010).

As the range and diversity of online communication practices continue to evolve,
likewise the range and variety of foci and concerns for language education researchers
are robustly developing. Along with increased interest in online language teaching
and learning practices has come a rapid broadening of research epistemologies and
methodological techniques and approaches fitted and retrofitted to new online language
and literacy practices. In short, CALL researchers have moved to employing forms of
inquiry that extend well beyond the traditions of SLA and applied linguistics drawing
on methods traditionally associated with, for example, sociology, education, critical
Cultural studies, media literacy studies and communications. This expanding repertoire
of inquiry perspectives and tools bears synthesis and it is the goal of this chapter on
contemporary research practices in the digital age, particularly with social media, to
provide this.

Technologies associated with social media are often discussed within the broader
context of Web 2.0, a term which came into prominent use near the end of 2004.
O’Reilly (2005) is generally credited for systematically describing some of the defining
characteristics of the emerging phenomenon, a phenomenon that has enabled new
forms of communication, participation, sharing and networking. Language educators
have been quick to appropriate Web 2.0 technologies to facilitate participatory practices
in language learning, guiding learners to individually or collaboratively generate content
which can be posted, rapidly updated and continually revised. These potential means
of collaboration provide opportunities to integrate language skills, while supporting the
development of identity and critical literacy through ways that mirror authentic uses
of social media in the general population (Warschauer, 2009). Research that examines
such instructional activity of necessity calls for new ways of conceptualizing and in
turn investigating how languages are being taught and learned with and within social
media contexts.

Traditions

The formal study of language learning began as research strictly rooted in
psychology. Research problems, questions, methods and interpretations were
thus shaped by the belief that acquiring language is a matter of the architecture
and functions of the individual human mind (Davis, 1995; Gass & Schacter, 1989).
From this perspective, scientific experiments comprised the default methodological
technique with mental modelling the goal of controlled experimentation. In addition
to controlled laboratory-like approaches that involved such techniques as language
testing and target language elicitation techniques, questions concerning how
languages are learned were tackled via close study of language classes. Groups
of learners were used as control and experimental subjects with methods and materials as interventions, metrics of learner characteristics as correlates and questions about minds in interaction with methods and materials posed. Measures of learner and teacher traits along with the influences of interventions were often the focus. It is from this positivist tradition that many concepts about language education widely held today had their genesis, and the psychological perspective continues to be employed in language and literacy studies currently. However, while the psychological perspective on second language learning research continues to hold sway, the explosive advent of online social media in both formal and informal language teaching and learning has, of necessity, led to new research perspectives and approaches. Online social media, after all, involve the messy, unpredictable use of human language for motivated, authentic purposes, a phenomenon that does not lend itself to laboratory controls. Social media involve evolving forms of human interaction, forms of interaction that require new approaches to understanding language learning and teaching along with research perspectives, approaches and techniques that serve in building such understanding.

Precedent for a similar extension of research perspectives was set in the early 1970s with the educational study of foreign and second language classrooms, a shift that broadened concepts of language learning to include the social/contextual processes of teaching and learning. The dynamics of teacher and student interactions in live, intact language classrooms became focal (see, for example, Chaudron, 1988). Indeed, one of the earliest studies on internet-based language learning activity through social interaction was shaped by these parallel concerns and, thereby, illustrates the potentially parallel perspectives and methods of classroom-based research in approaching questions about online language learning (Sauvignon & Roithmeier, 2004). As is demonstrated in this and many subsequent studies of social media for language education, research techniques such as observation and analysis of class and group activities using the written and aurally recorded utterances of teachers and students make good sense for inquiries that examine various perspectives and dimensions of online social/instructional interaction. Such approaches help to account for the complex social interactions that occur such as teacher talk, learner production, group interactions, question types, misunderstandings, clarification and the like as these unfold online. Moreover, sociolinguistic and ethnographic approaches that examine communication in action, including examination of how and why humans acquire new languages, have themselves evolved new techniques and approaches in the last decades (Nunan & Bailey, 2007). For example, classroom-based language research that has examined language teacher talk, learner-learner interactions, oral and written feedback types, learner products, etc. has brought new understandings and insights to both theory and practice in language education while establishing a solid base of empirical work on which those within the field can build. It is from these roots that current research practices in language education through social media are likewise developing. After all, both online social media practices and language classroom interactions share the same goals and are pre-eminently social in nature.
In the context of research, online interactions with others closely parallel interactions in F2F classrooms. It is therefore not surprising to find a number of studies whose theoretical frames, research questions, methods and analyses emulate to some degree second and foreign language classroom research. Combined methodological techniques of, for example, ethnography in combination with quantification used as a supporting tool to determine and track patterns in participant interaction are starting to be employed. On the other hand, practitioner reports are at the same time proliferating. Warschauer and Grimes (2007) have observed that although ‘a number of educators are beginning to report on their experiences (in L2 education), publications to date mostly consist of lists of suggestions or summaries of experiences by practitioners’ (p.12). Because social media tools are relatively new, language educators clearly need time to appropriate their use to effectively complement pedagogical practices (Meskill, Anthony, Hilliker, Tseng & You, 2006). As such, many reports of social media uses to date involve teacher-researchers attempting to integrate these tools into classroom pedagogy. This kind of teacher research has thereby emerged as a distinct and significant trend of inquiry among language practitioners (e.g., Von Der Ende et al., 2001).

Lankshear and Knobel (2005) point out that practitioner research and academic research both share systematic and methodical approaches to investigation because they are ‘derived more or less directly from academic discipline areas’ (p. 20). The main distinction between the two is perspective and guidance via theory. The emphases of practitioner research are issues of practice and therefore, the authors go on to observe that ‘professional-practitioner researchers will spend less time dabbling with the niceties of theory and the theoretical and conceptual disputes in the discipline area and more time making a wise selection of systematic methods and tools for addressing the practical issue’ (p. 20). However, they stressed that practitioner researchers are not exempt from maintaining ‘appropriate standards for “being systematic” ’ (p. 20).

Because the purpose of teacher research – to illuminate opportunities and means for local instructional change – are distinct, these are not included in the following discussion of trends in methodological approaches and techniques in researching social media in language education.

Environments, socio/affective dimensions and pedagogical processes

In the following sections we provide a synthesis of key techniques in the research of language learning in online social networks in the context of three research foci we see dominating the current literature: the online environment, the socio/affective dimension and pedagogical concerns. The aim behind this categorization is to make clear distinctions between the major purposes and perspectives that drive research in the field while outlining the methodological techniques employed by researchers...
within each of these categories. The rationale for doing so lies in the vast diversity
of research problems, purposes and approaches that characterizes the current state
of research and a concurrent need we see to sort through and name these diverse
positions so as to further discussion and future directions.

The first category comprises research studies that foreground as their focus the
design, tools and resources of a given online social media environment. In short, studies
that fall into this category focus primarily on the online environment and its affordances.
Such studies tend to view the environment as impacting communicative exchanges
in ways that are unique and/or of direct relevance to language and culture learning.
Therefore, research questions, data interpretations, implications and conclusions
foreground the online environment and its characteristics. The second category of
research concentrates on the socio/affective dimensions of online social media as
these relate to language education. When socio/affective aspects are foregrounded,
learners’ reactions and reflections are elicited via a range of methodological techniques
and form the core of such studies’ chief observations. Finally, our third category,
pedagogical concerns, comprises research that focuses on teaching practices with
social media technologies. Included in this category are studies that centre on the
pedagogical tasks, strategies and discourse of language educators as they design and
orchestrate learning in online venues.

Criteria for including studies rest squarely with the social aspect of online social
media. Included are empirical research studies that state clearly framed research
questions, employ suitable approaches for gathering, analysing and interpreting
data, and that contribute to understanding theory and practice of language learning.
We discuss these three groups of studies in terms of the research approaches and
techniques each applied. We then attempt a synthesis of the current state of research
in language learning technologies as reflected in the body of work selected and, in turn,
future directions of the same.

**Research focus: The online environment**

Specific research focus on online environments, be they course management systems
(CMSs), wikis, blogs, friendship applications, virtual worlds, etc., and what their
design and resources afford for language learning and teaching reflects the earliest
of research concerns in the history CALL, what the machine does (Meskill, 2005).
It is inquiry that is concerned specifically with the visual, physical and functional
characteristics of what appears and occurs on the computer screen as it relates to
language learning. What distinguishes current online social spaces from what might
be considered traditional CALL spaces is the presence of other people and, therefore,
opportunities to communicate with them for authentic purposes. In this respect, social
spaces afford any number of interactive possibilities that are inherently social and,
therefore, complex. Many researchers have thus turned to more socially motivated
theoretical perspectives and concomitant methodological techniques and approaches
that aim to narrate these human interactions as they unfold in online social spaces with emphasis on the specific affordances that in some way influence online language learning activity.

The foregrounding of the online spaces and their resources shapes the development of the research questions, approaches to and techniques of data collection, and the interpretations and implications that emerge for such studies. Thorne’s (2003) case study of three foreign language learners as they employed online interactional spaces to practise the target language with native speakers is an example of such foregrounding. As an outgrowth of both the theoretical positioning developed for the study and the resulting questions and data interpretations, the research outcomes highlight the semiotic realm in which learners interacted as integral to online activity. The study concludes that uses and outcomes of online tools and resources for language education are contingent upon individuals as social actors in dynamic and complex activity, an observation similar to that of Flewitt and Lamy (2011) in their study of French-English learner exchanges. Both inquiries employed analyses of transcripts of learners’ online interactions with the goal of characterizing how language learners respond to opportunities afforded by social media environments. Both studies’ analyses were accomplished through coding systems that coordinated verbal and non-verbal interactions in conjunction with environmental affordances relevant to learners’ interactions, a research technique afforded by video recordings of students as they interacted online.

In an examination of learners employing corrective feedback with one another online, Sauro and Smith (2010) analysed chatscripts (transcripts of synchronous student–student conversations) to determine whether a key affordance of online communication – control over time for planning, review and editing – impacted learners’ monitoring of target language production. The researchers examined and coded the study’s chatscripts for syntactic complexity, productive use of grammatical gender and lexical diversity as a means of determining learners’ production planning and monitoring behaviours. Using similar methodological techniques, Smith (2005) tracked learner uptake of new lexical items during synchronous chats and likewise concluded that time and the visual representation of the language in use contributed positively to acquisition. Neither study employed additional methodological techniques to confirm these observations.

In another study that examines what the authors term ‘chat logs’, Zheng, Young and Wagner (2009) undertook four case studies of English learners interacting in game-based virtual worlds. Employing an environmental perspective, the researchers used a range of methodological techniques and data sources to pursue understanding of online language learner interactions while students gamed online: participant observation, interviews and the analysis of QA-related communication artefacts. The research also contrasts learners’ F2F and online avatar interactions with the aim of detecting contextual influences. The researchers found emerging patterns of online interactions around the accomplishment of the gaming tasks afforded by the online environment in which students interacted. These they have labelled ‘negotiations for action’, or language used to coordinate activity online, a construct that is potentially valuable as more language learning research is carried out in gaming environments.
Jepson’s (2005) mixed-method study compared patterns of repair moves in synchronous text chatrooms and voice chatrooms on the internet. The study draws its theoretical base from the role of social interaction in language acquisition, with a specific focus on repair moves related to negotiation of meaning and negative feedback. Data on repair moves were collected through transcripts of 5-minute, synchronous text and voice chatroom sessions made by participants. Quantitative statistical analysis revealed that a higher number of repair moves were made in voice chats compared to text chats. Qualitative discourse analysis and interaction analysis indicate that repair work in voice chats was often pronunciation-related. The research highlighted that although text chat is the more widely used, voice chat offers an environment which is more conducive for authentic meaning making that resembles F2F interaction. The conclusion was supported by evidence from voice chats which yielded a comparatively higher number of repair moves specifically related to negotiation of meaning.

Beyond the use of coded transcripts of online learner interactions, additional methodological techniques have been employed in exploring characteristics of the online environment along with the tools and resources learners use and to what effect. Lam and Rosario-Ramos (2009), for example, first distributed a questionnaire to hundreds of bilingual, bi-literate social media devotees. From these responses they invited a group of approximately 30 people to participate in focus groups. The researchers elicited participants’ stories, observations and reflections concerning their multilingual, multicultural online practices and employed transcripts of these focus groups in their analysis of bilinguals’ multi-literate practices in online social media sites. They focused particularly on the use of digital media and representations that participants employed as part of the online interactions. From these data and their attendant research questions, the authors conclude that digital media are important tools for young people to both maintain their mother tongue and expand uses of the host language and culture.

In an effort to characterize language learner collaborations when developing wiki entries, Kost (2011) employed systematic tracking of the planning, composing and revising strategies of native English speakers learning German as a second language. Using a taxonomy of revision types, patterns of students’ collaborative writing strategies in an environment that affords linking, cross-referencing and consensus building were identified. Results suggest that wiki-hosted collaborative writing processes reflect the non-linear nature of both collaborative writing and content production in a wiki environment. Using a similar approach, Kuteeva (2011) also tracked learners’ revision patterns in a wiki environment. In this study with learners of English for specific purposes, the focus was on determining if and how learners’ awareness of audience—the broad readership of the internet— influenced their composing processes. Along with tracking writing revisions, learners’ questionnaire responses revealed that composing in the wiki led learners to consider their readership. They consequently used a greater variety of interactional resources including different kinds of engagement markers (personal pronouns, questions and commands), self-mentions, attitude markers, hedges, boosters and so forth.
Integrating layers of metadata into research involving EFL learners collaborating on wiki entries, Lund (2008) analysed video records of F2F learner collaborations, digital records of learner content development, along with open-ended questions for learners to address regarding their collaboration and composing processes. Based on the premise that we come to knowledge by taking part in activities where individuals relate to a greater collective that evolves over time and where language and material artefacts function as structural resources, the researcher probed the ways that oral discourse supports written discourse given the tools, resources and purposes of wiki content building. The study illustrates research techniques by which learners’ voices and identities can be methodologically integrated into profiles of online language learner collaborations.

Section summary: Environment

While each of these studies foregrounds the affordances of online social media environments, each develops and approaches its dataset (transcriptions of online and offline instructional interactions, focus groups and interviews) differently according to its theoretical positioning, purpose and system of data coding. In order to identify how venue affordances steer and influence online discourse, the focus of coding becomes learner uses and interactions with and through such affordances (Flewitt & Lamy, 2011; Thorne, 2003), learner syntactic and lexical uptake (Sauro & Smith, 2010; Smith, 2005), different language repair strategies by venue (Jepson, 2005), language use specific to online tasks (Zheng et al., 2009), bilingual/bicultural identity constructions with digital media (Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009), the tracking of collaborative constructions (Kost, 2011), the development of collective group practices over time (Lund, 2008) and the specific features of the online venue that shape these.

By tracking language learner uses and perceptions of online social media with an eye on the characteristics of the venue, researchers are documenting particular practices in evolving discourse genres attendant to these spaces. In the following section where the focus of research shifts to socio-affective outcomes of online interactions, we see similar systems of data collection and analytic techniques applied through a different lens.

Research focus: Socio/affective dimensions

The social turn in second language studies has been well documented (Block, 2003). To some extent one could point to the advent of online social media as playing a catalytic role in this shift from focusing on the individual learning mind to focusing on minds learning in social contexts. Many among the most recent generations of language learners after all are native to these online social spaces and daily participate in their evolution (Turkle, 2011).

One of the earliest indicators of a social turn in CALL research was Warschauer’s (1999) study of online, socially motivated language learning spaces (see Warschauer, 2000 for an article-length account). In this seminal two-year ethnography of culturally
diverse learners interacting online to develop their language and literacy, a combined
data collection approach and analysis including observations, interviews and transcripts
of learner interactions resulted in narrative case studies. Key moments are highlighted
and explicated by the researcher with socio/affective dimensions as the focal concern.
In-depth analysis of cases reveals the importance of digital literacies as a form of
social/affective empowerment, with online spaces providing opportunities for target
language voice and language development.

In a more recent study of language learners interacting in social media sites using the
target language, Clark and Gruba (2010) employed an auto-ethnographic (diary studies)
research technique to track the practices and uses of English by Japanese students in
LiveMocha. From their thematic analysis of longitudinal transcript and student diary data,
the researchers observed learners gaining confidence in the target language thereby
securing their places as members of an online community; members who alternatively
took on the roles of language learners and language teachers. Using similar methodological
techniques, Harrison and Thomas (2009) observed that language learners who would
otherwise be reticent to seek out conversation opportunities with native speakers were
comfortable and proficient in doing so in this same online social media site.

In a study of classroom community-building employing blogs, learners of Italian
contributed posts to a class blog about Italian food (Miceli, Murray & Kennedy, 2010).
Use of the shared space of a class blog, in lieu of individual student blogs, was a
strategy to promote authentic interaction as a community. Data sources included
transcripts of blog entries and end-of-semester questionnaires administered to
determine if the blogging activity positively or negatively influenced participants’ sense
of belonging to the class-group. Blog transcripts were coded using Rovai’s (2001)
scheme of ‘connected voice’, indicating a higher sense of belonging, and ‘independent
voice’, indicating a lower sense of belonging. Analyses suggested that the blogging
activity successfully promoted learner interaction and engendered a strong sense of
community among the students.

Employing a corpus of learner interactions with native speakers of the target
language accompanied by participant interviews, Pasfield-Neofitou (2011) probed
evolving L2 and target culture identity work on the part of language learners. Of
particular importance in this study was the experience of foreignness as students
negotiated new L2 identities in virtual worlds. The researchers employed online and F2F
interviews, transcripts of participation in blogs, wikis, and other social media venues
and focus group data collection techniques. They undertook analyses using a social
realism framework. The researchers observe that virtual immersion has both benefi ts
(motivation to use L2 authentically, access to authentic materials) and constraints
(feeling of foreignness that results in reluctance to use the L2).

Arnold (2007) examined language learners’ communication apprehension
online. The investigation was situated within socio-affective areas of attitudes
and motivation in language learning. Three communicative formats – face-to-face,
synchronous and asynchronous – were included to compare affective dimensions
of the environments. Students interacted through six group discussions where they
discussed open-ended personal topics in stable groups of three to four learners.
The dataset consisted of pre- and post-questionnaire responses to items probing levels of nervousness and self-confidence while engaging in discussions along with an adaptation of Horwitz et al.’s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The post-questionnaire included an open-ended section which gave students opportunities to provide self-reports on their experiences of oral communication in the foreign language. Analyses of these data indicate no statistically significant differences between the asynchronous and the synchronous communication groups in terms of communication apprehension reduction. In fact, both forums for discussions seemed to provide positive communication experiences for students. However, they do suggest that practice in synchronous communication might be more beneficial for increasing students’ confidence levels due to similarities with F2F communication.

Finally, a study of language learning utilizing Second Life, a popular 3D simulated world, Henderson, Huang, Grant and Henderson (2009) traced Chinese learners’ degree of self-efficacy as they actively used the target language to socialize in this virtual environment. The researchers collected extensive pre- and post-questionnaire data regarding learners’ beliefs about their abilities to use Mandarin effectively when communicating with others. Mixed results lead to a call for more research on ‘possible connections between virtual worlds and perceived relevance of enactive mastery experiences’ (Henderson et al., 2009, p. 471).

**Section summary: Socio/affective dimensions**

In order to discover and describe socio/affective trends and outcomes for language education with social media, a number of data strategies are being employed. Coded observations of both online and F2F learner interactions, learner self-reporting, interviews and questionnaires are being used to probe socio/affective dimensions of social media in terms of empowerment (Clark & Gruba, 2010; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Warschauer, 1999), community building (Miceli, Murray & Kennedy, 2010), L2 user identity (Pasfield-Neofitou, 2011) and learner confidence (Arnold, 2007; Henderson et al., 2009). As uses of and research on social media for language education expand, so too will interest in affective dimensions of learning languages in social media environments.

**Research focus: Pedagogical processes**

How language educators can best capitalize on social media environments for extended activities as well as blended and fully online instructional practices are becoming central, critical concerns for language educator professional development across the novice-seasoned instructor spectrum. And, as more language education develops for online venues, research that focuses on pedagogical strategies, task design and teacher practices becomes particularly important (Meskill & Anthony, 2010). The practical and concomitant conceptual changes that come with moving
some or all language instruction online are, after all, substantial (Meskill & Sadykova, 2011).

In a 2005 study of teacher-guided telecollaboration between learners of English and learners of Korean, Chung, Graves, Wesche and Barfurth examined transcripts of correspondence between the two groups. What marks this study distinct from those with a focus on socio/affective outcomes is the researchers’ foregrounding of the importance of task design, curricular coherence and teacher orchestration and guidance throughout these exchanges. With these instructional dimensions firmly in place, language learners in both groups demonstrated their ability to both complete tasks using the target language while coaching one another in the focal content and language in use. Similarly Müller-Hartmann’s (2000) analysis of transcripts of online language learner interactions also foregrounds the importance of instructional tasks and task structures for successful learner exchanges online. In Dekinet’s (2008) study focusing on instructional strategies, conversation analysis was used to determine whether and how peer-tutoring techniques would be responded to by learners of ESL. Native-speaker undergraduates were trained in online peer language assistance strategies that they employed with international students. Post-tutoring surveys indicate that NNS participants’ language awareness was raised in response to trained tutor feedback on their target language output. Similarly, Wang (2009) examined the pedagogical context and procedures involved in preparing language learners to provide one another feedback on their blog posts. Learners were carefully instructed in effective ways to respond to one another. Transcripts of their blog interactions were subsequently analysed to determine if and how the feedback training was used and, if so, whether and how it was responded to.

Using F2F classroom recordings, transcripts of online interactions, and reflections of participating teachers, Lund (2006) conducted three case studies of EFL professionals’ teaching practices in blended environments. The researcher tracked developing teaching practices that crossed and merged between online and F2F instructional contexts over the course of 18 months. Data reveal changes in what language got taught as well as the ways the target language was consequently used. Additionally, the research highlighted the specific pedagogical practices that must constantly accommodate new agencies and artefacts between and within instructional venues. Similarly, in a longitudinal classroom-based study Dooly (2011) examined the interplay of online telecollaborative discourse practices and those of the daily F2F classroom. From the emerging blended practices under observation, Dooly identified important consonances and dissonances between teacher plans and actual language learning, a critical consideration in the design, implementation and evaluation of pedagogical practices that integrate social media. Dooly employed discursive analysis of F2F and online interactions using close, line-by-line description and diachronic interpretation of the interactions in context.

Examining the impact of the online instructional language teaching strategy of highlighting text or ‘textually enhanced feedback’, Sachs and Suh (2007) found that this instructional strategy contributes to language learners’ awareness of gaps in their target language development via student self-reports in conjunction with pre/
post-online conversation assessments. In this inquiry, verbal protocols were used to
probe learner awareness of text enhancements during authentic online communication
and their influence on learning.

In a series of studies that similarly focused on instructional conversation strategies
in online venues, Meskill and Anthony (2005, 2007, 2008) found that learners of
Russian responded both in terms of lexical and syntactic uptake and increased
language awareness in response to a set of verbal strategies used by their instructors
as they responded to teachable moments in blended and fully online courses. Each
inquiry employed combined methodological techniques of archival transcript coding,
pre- and post-student questionnaires and student interviews in determining learner
responses to instructor-orchestrated online conversations. Iterative data analyses
included tracking learner uptake throughout semester-long transcripts and interview
protocols whereby learners commented directly on their contributions in course
transcripts. Linkages between online discourse and evidence of language learning
could thereby be drawn.

In a study of tandem learning, whereby learners with different mother tongues
interact online to teach one another, Hauck and Youngs (2008) examined task design
and participant interaction in asynchronous and synchronous modes. The collaborative
task required learners to compare their immediate and wider physical environments.
Multiple data sources included pre- and post-treatment questionnaires, recordings of
online interactions between tutor and participants, student products in blogs, transcripts
of discussions among learner and tutor participants and semi-structured interviews.
The post-questionnaire elicited learners’ perceptions of the two different learning
environments, tasks, connectivity and interactivity. The multimodal affordances,
especially the graphics tools, enabled learners to construct sophisticated visual
representations of their physical surroundings, which was a central requirement in the
task. In spite of these observations concerning online environments, the authors’ main
conclusion was that ‘unless there are well-constructed tasks, simply participating in a
synchronous oral/aural exchange does not necessarily lead to effective and motivated
language and intercultural learning’ (p. 102).

Using transcripts of intermediate EFL learners as they undertook collaborative
tasks in the 3D virtual world, Second Life, Peterson (2010) examined learners’
participation structures by task and within task. Types of pedagogical tasks
determined the amount and quality of learner interactions and also elicited
synchronous participation strategies specific to tasks in virtual worlds, a promising
direction for inquiry as virtual worlds become commonplace venues for language
instruction.

**Section summary: Pedagogical processes**

The preceding studies foreground the pedagogical processes involved in the utilization
of social media for language education. Each employs similar methodological strategies
for doing so with coding by instructional task (Hauck & Youngs, 2008; Peterson, 2010).
and by instructor pedagogical behaviours predominating (e.g., Chung et al., 2005; Dooly, 2011; Lund, 2006; Meskill & Anthony, 2005, 2007, 2008). Additional research strategies of examining the outcomes of explicitly training students to provide peer feedback via analysis of peer interaction transcripts are represented in Dekhinet (2008) and Sachs and Suh (2007). While the ways that language educators are integrating social media tools and practices continue to be reported as teacher research (see earlier discussion), and as language educators gain expertise and confidence in integrating social media into their instruction, additional research questions and approaches will consequently arise and be taken up through extended inquiry. For the moment, the methodological strategies of tracking instructional practices, tracking instructor language and its impact and tracking student perceptions of instructional events are represented.

**Conclusion, future directions**

In their book, *Internet Inquiry: Conversations about Method*, Markham and Baym (2008) ask

> Can we still draw on theories that were developed in an earlier epoch to frame our inquiry and explain our findings? How do we apply procedural models to a study when these models do not seem to fit anymore? How can we move beyond documenting the new to saying things of lasting value about phenomena that change so rapidly? (p. xiii)

At this point in the historical and conceptual evolution of online social media in language education, the bulk of research data is comprised of transcripts of online interactions with three foregrounded foci emerging: focus on the environment, focus on socio/affective outcomes and focus on pedagogy. The methodological techniques for probing these aspects of social media for language education are many, with the predominant dataset consisting of the convenient transcript of online interactions between and among learners, others and their instructors.

We have identified several notably more sophisticated methods of capturing data to help describe student interactions in social media spaces including focus groups, interviews, iterations of learner revisions, video records of face-to-face learner collaborations, digital records of learner content development, open-ended questionnaires, learner self-reports, questionnaires and transcripts of collaborative work. The third group of studies we reviewed highlights methodological strategies of tracking student perceptions of instructional events, tracking of instructional practices, instructor language and its impact. The datasets include transcripts of online language learner interactions, classroom video recordings, written teacher reflections, questionnaires, interviews, student self-reports, verbal protocols and samples of student products and samples of written student feedback. The studies and their methodologies point to an increasingly greater sophistication in using various tools to capture and describe
student interactions in online environments, while also focusing on various pedagogies and online affordances that support student language acquisition.

Research questions fashioned to address online language teaching and learning, along with the theories and methods that animate these, have, like the phenomena themselves, expanded and diversified. And, as with second language acquisition studies more generally, this is in large part due to the limitations of positivist psychology-based inquiry. Strictly controlled comparison of, for example, teaching methods or materials becomes problematic both in terms of implementation and external validity. Likewise, the situation-dependent and anarchic nature of language learner interactions with others in social media venues does not lend itself to controlled experimentation. Instead, as we have seen, language education researchers have been actively exploring utilization of more robust research methods beyond restrictive psychology-based approaches.

New uses of new technologies inspire new inquiry. Learning languages in cyberspace is no exception. The challenge is to conceptualize, problematize and research the complex relationships that are organically arising between educators and students and the technologies they use in these spaces. Like internet practices generally, research design is always evolving. Examining complex phenomena such as language in these online venues can thereby never be static or prescriptive. Nor are research methods recipes for success. They are, rather, means, tools of argument and ways to narrate and illuminate what goes on in the world from well-established perspectives. We have surveyed the current range of research approaches and techniques employed for language education and social media as they fall into one of the prevailing three perspectives: the environment, socio/affective dimensions and pedagogy. Future directions for such work will be accommodating ever-evolving online discourse communities as well as exemplary online teaching practices as these develop. Consideration of these three areas of emphasis and their respective research techniques may assist researchers in being clear and consistently explicit about the purposes and perspectives of their studies.

References

RESEARCHING LANGUAGE LEARNING


