
Social Networking and Informal Second Language Learning in Livemocha and Busuu Online Communities

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Abstract

This paper reports on a PhD study about learners' construction of opportunities for second language (L2) use in online communities designed for L2 learning.

The main objectives of this paper are to explain the dynamics generated within these online communities, to describe what types of experience learners make of these communities and, accordingly, to describe what kinds of behaviour they enact.

This paper adopts a socio-cultural framework and an online ethnographic approach. The methods of the investigation ranged from online fieldwork, to online survey and online interviews, which allowed the cross-checking of the data obtained.

The results showed the presence of different profiles of learners, different forms of peer assistance and provide information of learners' engagement to online communities over time.

Abstract in Spanish

Este estudio está basado en una tesis doctoral sobre estudiantes de lengua que crean oportunidades para comunicarse en la lengua meta en unas comunidades en línea diseñadas para el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua.

Los objetivos principales de este estudio son explicar las dinámicas que se generan en estas comunidades en línea, describir las experiencias de los estudiantes en estos entornos y, consecuentemente, describir cómo se comportan y qué acciones toman.

El estudio se inscribe en el marco teórico de la perspectiva sociocultural y está enfocado en el método etnográfico. Los métodos de investigación incluyen trabajo de campo en línea, un cuestionario en línea y entrevistas en línea. Esta triangulación metodológica ha permitido comprobar la exactitud de los datos obtenidos.

A través del análisis de los resultados se han observado diferentes perfiles de estudiantes, se han evidenciado diferentes formas de retroalimentación entre pares y se ha obtenido información sobre el nivel de dedicación a las comunidades en línea por parte de los estudiantes a lo largo del tiempo.

Keywords: online communities, second language learning, social network sites (SNSs)

Introduction

Current Second Language (L2) learners come into contact with a wide range of voice applications, social networks, video-sharing websites, podcasts, wikis and blogs, and are more and more integrating the traditional bookish way of learning a language with the Web. Among the different online applications that arose with the social web, there are the so called “language learning communities” such as *Busuu* (www.busuu.com). These communities are designed as common social network sites like *Facebook* (www.facebook.com) with the difference that they rely on learning content and material in the target language (TL) selected. In addition, they are designed in such a way so as to put into contact learners with native speakers from all over the world in order to exchange one’s native language with the TL. The pedagogical foundation of these communities is tandem language learning, which consists in a language partnership in which each learner is an expert of his/her interlocutor’s TL. These communities are untied to formal learning institutions, they are characterized by the absence of teachers (except for the presence of tutors in the case learners pay a fee) and the activities on the communities are structured with progressive didactic units and grammar exercises carried out consciously by learners. For all these reasons, they are a clear example of how formal, non-formal and informal spheres are intermingled. These environments designed for a potential language improvement and based on social networks raise some questions about the use that online users make of its tools and the behaviours enacted when inhabiting the communities. In particular, this study investigates learners’ behaviours in the online communities and their spontaneous creation of opportunities to practice the language in their informal interactions with other learners.

Literature Review

The literature at the basis of this study covers the 3 following levels: (a) L2 learning practices in association with SNSs, (b) L2 learning practices occurring in online communities, (c) and L2 telecollaborative practices in online chats and communities.

Social Network Sites

This study is an extension and a contribution to the analysis of L2 practices using SNSs through the lens of the socio-cultural theory made by a considerable number of researchers (McCarty, 2009; Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Halvorsen, 2009) and that characterises the current research in the field. It adds more insights to the field because it takes into account the perception of online learners who have been selected randomly in the SNSs rather than in a classroom context. Their way of inhabiting the communities is free and voluntary and it is not dependent on the syllabus.

Online Communities for L2 learners

In the realm of online communities designed specifically for L2 learning, the literature shed light on their affordances and constraints under technical and pedagogical points of view. The literature has also stressed that these online communities could play a valuable role if integrated in formal learning contexts and in telecollaboration projects, for instance (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Chotel & Mangenot, 2011; Brick, 2011; Lloyd, 2012; Chotel, 2012). Moreover, as the literature shows, in these online communities, rather than strengthening learners' previous offline social bonds with their language partners, the main tendency is to build new ones (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Liaw, 2011; Chotel, 2012), weaker and fragmentary. My study provides a further contribution because it investigates learners over a longer period of time and to analyse if, how and why some learners are able to shape their own network of language partners after facing the challenging “zapping” interactional situations.

Telecollaboration in Online Chats and in Online Communities

Online environments have been considered potentially beneficial for L2 learning through telecollaboration practices in particular. Research in L2 learning communities has mainly focused on the telecollaboration between geographically distant learners exchanging their native languages in the online chats (Lam, 2009; Black, 2009; Pasfield-Neoufitou, 2009; Tudini, 2010; Kurata, 2011; Gonzales, 2012). Not only did they find that the chat cemented these relations but also that the visual nature of the text-based chat facilitated repair when learners had as primary goal language learning rather than social interaction. Tudini (2010) explored the role of online chat in supporting the teaching and learning of foreign languages in open-ended tasks and in out-of-class settings. She identified important aspects occurring in the real-time textual conversations such as repair, negotiation of meaning, peer assistance, visual saliency and noticing. Gonzales' (2012) study on telecollaboration is very insightful since it relies on naturalistic data on *Livemocha*. This study revolved around the L2

pragmatic development (strategies in conversation closings) in CMC carrying out the analysis of user perception interviews and online interactions of seven learners participating on *Livemocha* over the course of one academic year. The author analysed their conversation closings over time and found several patterns in conversation closings such as thanking, apologizing and making future plans.

The present study makes a contribution to telecollaboration research both at a micro and a macro level. At a micro level, it provides longitudinal, naturalistic data of spontaneous interactions among learners in a CMC context, within communities designed for L2 learning and in absence of institutional organization and pedagogical intervention. At a macro level, it researches on if and how peer assistance is established among learners and on learners' use and perceptions of their learning tools to facilitate the L2 process.

Objectives and Research Questions

This study is to my knowledge one of the first longitudinal studies about informal interactions in online communities relying on a naturalistic corpus data and occurring in an out-of-class setting.

The objectives are:

- To learn about the dynamics generated within these online communities and how such experiences might foster or impede opportunities for the use of the language.
- To know more about learners' autonomy without the guidance of a teacher in informal L2 learning in online communities.
- To assess the effectiveness of online communities for meeting long-term learning outcomes.

The research questions in broad are:

- What kind of opportunities for L2 use occur in the learners' interactions in online communities and what social and contextual factors affect and contribute to the construction of such opportunities and to learners' perceptions of L2 learning?
- What are the affordances and constraints of online communities in relation to their effectiveness for long-term learning outcomes? That is, is learners' engagement maintained constant, increased or decreased over time?

The Socio-Cultural Framework

The big theoretical underpinning of this study is socio-cultural theory, according to which human mind is mediated (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) and L2 learning is socially constructed through interaction. Vygotsky (1978; Wertsch, 1985) provides the basis for socio-cultural approaches to learning with an emphasis on the social construction of learning. According to the socio-cultural theory, social contexts are crucial to understand L2 learning and personal, interpersonal and social factors have a strong influence on access to linguistic resources, interactional opportunities and L2 learning outcomes. Research in L2 learning has usually employed the sociocultural theory to explain the online interactions (Belz & Kinginger, 2002; Thorne, 2003) or to analyse collaborative online interactions and open-ended tasks in L2 classrooms (Kurata, 2011; Tudini, 2010; Darhower, 2007; Tanaka, 2005).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

An important socio-cultural notion employed for this investigation is The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In the field of language learning this is “the distance between the L2 learner’s developmental level as determined by independent language use, and the higher level of potential development as determined by how language is used in collaboration with a more capable interlocutor” (Ohta, 1995; p.96). The ZPD is basically the gap between what L2 learners can do by themselves and what they can do with assistance through collaborative interaction. Another notion related to the assistance in ZPD is “scaffolding” (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976; Rogoff & Gardner, 1984). It refers to the assistance provided to learners so that they are able to reach a higher level of performance. It is meaningful in the context of social networks because learners working together create a collaborative scaffold.

Activity Theory (AT)

The empirical work carried out is also guided by the conceptual framework of Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987). AT provided a theoretical framework and a valuable tool applicable to this study in order to gain a better understanding of the complex L2 learning practices enacted in the online communities, and in particular to understand learners’ construction of opportunities taking into account each single learner in relationship and his interdependence with the social environment of the community. AT also proved to work as a good conceptual model to conceive the use of L1 and/or L2 as resources as mediational artifacts to organise the on-going discourse (Kurata, 2011; pp.120-121) or to seek assistance (p.133) in their online conversations. The adoption of AT as an underpinning framework permitted to explain the division of

labour and the social roles and norms among learners while they are interacting in their informal social networks. It also allowed a deeper investigation on learners' goal-driven strategies in their learning experience and the possible incompatibility of two goals (i.e. grammar accuracy vs. self-confidence in speaking the L2) or two motives (socialization vs. language learning) (Kurata, 2011).

The Methodology

The methodology of this investigation relies on the interpretative paradigm, which, in line with AT and socio-cultural theory, holistically reconstructs isolated pieces of facts into a meaningful whole and which sees the world as complex, dynamic and socially constructed, interpreted and experienced by people in their interactions with each other and with the social systems (Schwandt, 1994). In fact, the analysis of the online community has taken into account the whole phenomenon as a complex system and the research focused on the complex interdependencies and dynamics developing within this system.

A Multiple Case Study Ethnographic Approach

The study relies on online ethnography, which is considered as the most common approach to investigating online communities (Thomsen, Straubhaar, & Bolyard, 1998). Through online ethnography I have studied the culture of the communities selected, the norms and rules determining learners' behaviour, their shared values and beliefs, their practices and their understanding of surrounding environment also when relating to others. This research is longitudinal because aimed to acquire new insights on the process of strengthening social-bonding between online learners, which is something that requires time to mature. In addition, this study adopts a case-study approach. This approach allowed an in-depth understanding of the participants' learning experiences and perspectives, as well as more focus on the process of construction of L2 use and learning opportunities in the online interactions.

The Methodology and its Phases

A wide range of qualitative methods has been adopted, from the online survey and the semi-structured interviews to the collection of samples of interactive discourse occurring in online social networks. In this way, the methodological triangulation, that is, the use of different methods to corroborate each other, allowed the cross-checking of the data collected, improving further internal validity. The methodology adopted is funnel-shaped and it consists of 6 phases, as the Figure 1 shows:

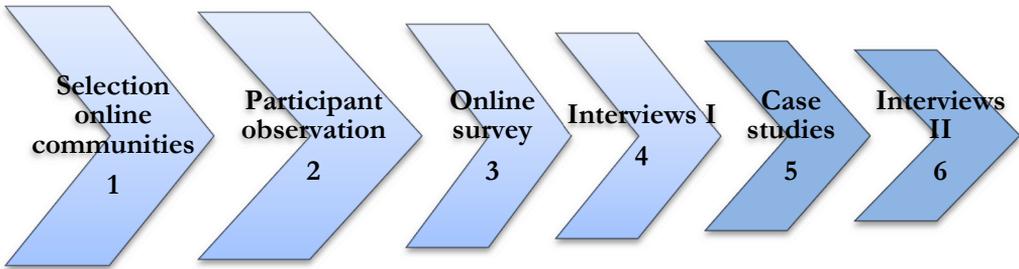


Figure 1. The 6 methodological phases of the investigation

Each phase opens up the way to the following phase and redirects to a deeper and deeper understanding of the behaviours enacted by informal learners in these communities, of the modalities in which peer assistance among them occurs, and of the different types of assistance they provide to each other.

- 1st phase: *Contextualization*. Review of the existing landscape of online communities for language learning and selection of *Busuu* and *Livemocha* communities as settings for the investigation.
- 2nd phase: *Fieldwork*. Immersion in the activities of the communities object of the study, inhabiting the communities and observing learners' behaviour.
- 3rd phase: *Survey submission*. The objective of this phase is to identify trends, patterns of behaviours and main practices among language learners in the online communities.
- 4th phase: *Interviews 1st cycle*. This phase elicited learners' more detailed accounts of their experience and of their language use and learning in the communities through semi-structured interviews.
- 5th phase: *Identification case studies*. Collection of samples of interactive discourse occurring in natural social settings and longitudinal micro-analysis of the learner discourse with the community interactants.
- 6th phase: *Recall interviews*. This phase consisted in interviewing the case studies at time distance with a two-fold purpose: verifying whether their level of engagement to the platform was maintained constant, decreased or increased; and also recording learners' reflections on the online interactional data they sent me some months before, to see whether their language exchange partnerships produced long-term learning outcomes.

Results

In relation to Question 1 about the opportunities to use the L2 that learners are able to construct in their interactions, the results of the survey and the interviews indicated that there are different profiles of learners and different learning behaviours to which correspond different uses of the platform, a different level of engagement and attitude and different types of opportunities for L2 use. Three broad categories of learners' profiles were distinguished (Malerba & Appel, 2016). To the (a) first category belong those learners who make a wide use of the didactic tools, to the (b) second those who decided to opt for the social networking features of the community. These learners in part prefer the interactions in the online chat because these suit their personal learning style and in part because of the behaviourist and repetitive didactic tools of these platforms; to the (c) third those of combine the use of didactic tools with the social networking features of the community. Learners belonging to profiles 2 and 3 proved to be those who have more opportunities of exposure to the TL if they interacted in the chat.

The results of the analysis of the online interactions in the chat provide concrete evidence of some specific forms of peer-assistance (mistake correction, metalinguistic talk, word provision, word explanation) learners exchanged once they had found a language partner or created their language partner network. In the case study phase learners' utterances proved how learners in their exchange partnership collaboratively co-construct opportunities to interact with their partners in the L2 in an authentic context. The corpus data analysed also provides examples of failure of peer-assistance provision and examples of successful peer-assistance provision. Results show that if learners have previously agreed on the roles as experts and novices of the language they are learning, their language partnership and peer assistance are more likely to result in a positive outcome. In this study, the analysis of learners' exchanges revealed more evidence of peer assistance and a potential for L2 learning in the case of more autonomous learners. In other words, those learners who showed a more autonomous attitude and were already lifelong learners when they joined the communities tended to have a more effective learning experience, to find interesting topics for discussion and to be able to combine social and pedagogical trajectories (even if not adequately supported by a teacher).

In relation to the Question 2 about learners' level of engagement to the platforms over time, it emerged that there is a wide amount of inactive users and that among the most active users there are many novice users. This means that there is a general decrease of

engagement over time, which was confirmed by the previous literature (Jee & Park, 2009; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Stevenson & Liu, 2010; Brick, 2011; Liaw, 2011). In particular, learner profile 1 is the more likely to abandon the communities given the repetitive and automatic learning activities, object of many critics and complaints. The survey also showed that there is a key-factor stimulating learners' activities and determining learners' engagement to the platforms, that is, prompt and adequate peer-assistance provision and offering. It emerged that learners are aware of the importance of the reciprocity between peers but seem not to be adequately trained and competent to provide correct assistance. Another problem that emerged regards the fact that it is difficult for learners to create bonds and to intertwine contacts with their language partners because many of them are not immediately available in the chat. This is due to the fact that they are inactive users, that they use the platforms in a different way or that they distrust the interactional aspect of the communities because of cyberflirting and hoaxing episodes. Results also show a prevalence of "networking", which emphasizes relationship initiation, often between strangers. Once a tandem partnership is established, it usually develops outside of the community and through other Web 2.0 tools. In other words, the communities after a while start being considered as a source where to draw online language partners. The results of the analysis in general confirm the presence of the "zapping" interactional situation among learners identified by Chotel (2012).

Conclusion

This study contributed to add more insight to lifelong learning processes and it enabled some continuity between formal and informal learning contexts, by providing some insights for teachers, tutors and practitioners but also for lifelong online L2 learners interested in integrating these learning practices with more traditional forms of learning. Given that collaboration between tandem partners is reflected in mutual support, equal contribution, same extent of benefit and equal roles (as learners or experts), this study makes a little contribution to the achievement of a better understanding of the dynamics occurring in online communities, on how to offer and respond to online assistance, to define social roles, to suggest an effective corrective feedback. The study also provided further contributions to the social aspect of L2 learning and to the field of telecollaboration drawing on learners' spontaneous interactions in a non-formal out-of-class context.

A limitation of this study concerns its longitudinal approach. On the one hand, the study was longitudinal because it looked at how learners developed their network of language partners and at their level of engagement to the platform over time, on the other hand the corpus data of the online interactions is not longitudinal. It is very difficult to track learners' online discourse over a long period of time, especially if the learners selected are volunteers spread all over the communities, do not depend on an institution where formal learning telecollaborative practices occur and are not rewarded by evaluation. Another limitation was that the presence of the researcher might have inevitably influenced the interviewees and the case studies during the data collection process.

Future research should insist with the idea of “bridging activities” (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008) between the communication occurring in out-of-class informal settings and the learning activities taking place in the formal context of the language classroom. To this regard, it would be useful, for instance, to apply AT to telecollaboration initiatives on *Livemocha* and *Busuu* occurring in formal contexts. To conclude, another possible direction for further research would be about technical and usability issues in relation to these sites in order to determine which design features are most suitable and helpful to language learners.

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