Social Network Sites and L2 Education
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Abstract

The use of social network sites for second and foreign (L2) language learning and teaching has recently gained attention by practitioners and researchers of applied linguistics and L2 education. Informed by socially informed theories of language learning and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) studies, researchers have examined L2 learning and use in non-educational or vernacular sites like Facebook, L2 pedagogy using vernacular sites, and the use of commercial social networks designed specifically for language learning, like LiveMocha. Findings implicate the role of self-organized, autonomous learning processes, the development of socio-collaborative learning community, and the challenges of balancing the learning benefits emergent from the user-driven agency of everyday use with the demands to meet formal curriculum-driven objectives. After a brief discussion of influences and definitions, this chapter examines, analyzes, and synthesizes selected research that illustrates these findings, concluding with problems and future directions.

Introduction

Since its inception, the Internet has facilitated the human behavior of social networking—engagement in social activity within a network defined by dyadic and group relationships. The activity we understand today as online social networking, typified by use of social network sites and services (SNSs) like Facebook and Twitter, has diverse origins in proto-Internet technologies like Usenet and bulletin board systems, which supported asynchronous discussion and resource sharing, and graphical webpage software and hosts, which afforded the creation and hyperlinking of personal homepages. Early services like America On Line and CompuServe offered users a single interface for accessing newsgroups, sharing information, and interacting socially with other network users. Starting in the early 2000s, Friendster, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Facebook launched SNSs that allowed individuals to create profiles, to connect to profiles of other users they knew or wanted to know in real life, and to share content with them. Unlike that of previous technologies, the architecture of SNSs utilized Web 2.0 innovations like XML (extensible markup language) to facilitate user-driven production, evaluation and resource sharing, stimulating new types of communicative, economic and learning activity. Over the last decade, with increasing accessibility to broadband and the rise of mobile technology, SNS use has become everyday linguistic and symbolic practice for millions around the world in dozens of languages. The phenomenon has garnered increasing attention among applied linguists and second and foreign
language (L2) learners and educators, who have sought to understand how this everyday activity might be leveraged for L2 teaching and learning (L2TL) purposes.

Early developments, influences, and definitions

Delineating the object of study in a review of SNS research is challenging due to multifarious origins and nebulous distinctions among definitions of SNS, social media, Web 2.0, and computer-mediated communication (CMC). While others have taken broader interpretations (e.g. Lamy and Zourou, 2013), the current review adheres as close as possible to boyd and Ellison’s (2007) definition of SNS as typified by user profile construction, connection traversing, and connection articulation and re-articulation—in Facebook, for example, this would involve updating, posting, or sharing on one’s own profile, friending others and viewing their posts and profiles, and commenting on and liking others’ posts. SNSs can be considered a type of social media, that is, any online media that involves the creation and/or sharing of media content, for instance through blogging (e.g. Tumblr or Wordpress), microblogging (Twitter), social gaming (Farmville or Clash of Clans), photo sharing (Instagram), reviewing (Yelp or TripAdvisor), or a host of other activities (see Solis, 2015). Confusion arises because social media applications are increasingly integrated into SNS interfaces or enhanced with SNS features and different SNSs emphasize certain features and configurations leading to different styles and cultures-of-use (Thorne, 2003). Different SNSs are popular in different countries—for example, Mixi in Japan, vKontakte in Russia, and RenRen in China. In addition, there are a host of commercial SNSs designed specifically for language learning (SNSsLL), like LiveMocha, Busuu, or Babbel, each with its own design.

As SNS use has become global and mainstream, academia has taken interest. In a review of over 400 studies on Facebook, Wilson, Gosling, and Graham (2012) identified five major areas of research focus: descriptive analysis of users, motivations for using Facebook, identity presentation, the role of Facebook in social interactions, and privacy and information disclosure. Education scholars (e.g. Selwyn et al., 2008) have argued that SNSs can facilitate the development of collaborative and participatory learning communities, as well as opportunities for informal and unstructured learning. In line with social science and general education, L2TL researchers and practitioners have also explored SNS use in L2 education—both vernacular SNSs like Facebook and Twitter, and SNSsLL like Livemocha. There has been a notable increase in publications and presentations on the topic, in both CALL and non-CALL journals, as well as in special journal issues (e.g. Demaizière and Zourou, 2012) and edited volumes (e.g. Lamy and Zourou, 2013; Lomicka and Lord, 2009). The research has multifarious origins in, and influences from, CALL scholarship focused on the social and cultural qualities of formal and naturalistic online language use and interaction, especially computer-mediated collaborative learning (e.g. Warschauer and Kern, 2000), intercultural communication, sociopragmatics, situated learning, and identity development and self-presentation (e.g. Lam, 2000). Perhaps because of the obvious connection, the “social turn” in SLA has had considerable influence on SNS research, and theoretical
frameworks of current research often originate in socially informed frameworks of L2TL like social constructivism, sociocultural theory, social realism, literacies as social practice, and language socialization. Commensurate with these frameworks, techniques and methods have ranged from attitudinal surveys and frequency analysis to CMC discourse analysis and ethnographic case studies. As has become the norm in CALL research on new technologies, initial work has tended to be theoretically agnostic, descriptive, and focused on potentials. However, as SNS technology has matured and become mainstream, researchers have begun to analyze their use and pedagogical application empirically, with more rigorous theoretical and methodological frameworks, often adapted from fields outside of traditional L2TL and applied linguistics.

Major contributions

Research to date has had three general foci with complementary goals: L2 learning and use in vernacular SNS, SNS-mediated L2 pedagogy, and the use of commercial SNSsLL. The purpose of the first is not only to inform both SNS pedagogy and SNSsLL design, but also to inform the study of autonomous and naturalistic L2 use and learning more broadly. The goal of research with the second focus is to leverage the motivational and situated nature of everyday SNS use for L2 learning purposes and integrate SNSs into formalized pedagogical structures effectively, as well as to inform the study of CALL pedagogy more broadly. Finally, research on SNSsLL seeks to understand how SNSsLL design integrates social network mechanics with pedagogical structures, and how designs impact learner-user experiences.

L2 learning and use in vernacular SNS

One common focus in the study of L2 learning and use in vernacular SNSs like Facebook is on the role of user agency and the diversity of user practices under what might seem to be common conditions, giving heed to Thorne’s (2003) sociocultural notion of cultures-of-use, or “the historically sedimented characteristics that accrue to a CMC tool from its everyday use” (p. 40). For example, Mitchell (2012) profiled the experiences of 9 adult ESL learners who used Facebook over 4 weeks. Coming from a variety of L1s, proficiency levels, and education levels, her participants exhibited notable variety in how they used the SNS to meet diverse individual goals, which included establishing new and maintaining home relationships, gaining exposure to English, and learning about US culture. While some goals like meeting new friends proved difficult, the participants met others by utilizing site affordances, like maintaining privacy and managing audiences through customized settings, or compensating for linguistic proficiency by extensive use of visual media.

Related to agency, another emergent theme is recognition of SNSs as arenas for self-presentation and identity negotiation, and the unique qualities of these among L2 learners and multilingual users. Work with this theme often hearkens to Lam’s work (e.g. 2000) on the online identity development of L1 Chinese immigrant teenagers. For example, Pasfield-Neofitou (2011), using a social realism lens that views “social
action as shaped by an interplay of social and systemic phenomena” (p. 95), examined the long-term use of a variety of SNS tools by learners of Japanese and their individual networks. She found that language choice in different SNS contexts varied according to user perception of audience and cultural practice; for example, English was preferred in Facebook, while Japanese was preferred in Mixi. In a finding that supports transcultural, dynamic views of identity, participants were found to use their Japanese learner and English speaker identities as strategic affordances for learning and interaction. Speaking to agency, the researcher also found that learners recognized the general benefits of virtual immersion and the affordances of different SNS and online tools for learning particular linguistic domains.

Another related theme is the capacity of SNS as a user-driven environment for socialization. To illustrate, Chen (2013) examined how two L1 Chinese students studying in the US projected their identities in Facebook over two years through “deliberate choices and appropriations of language, discourse, social role, and projection of cultural values and beliefs” (p. 145). Chen showed how one student’s increase in English language information sharing over time demonstrated a growing awareness of her audience and development of an expanded multilingual identity, while the other student’s increase in status updates in Chinese demonstrated her increasing reliance on home relationships for social interaction.

While it is not focused on L2 education, Androutsopoulos’ (2014) sociolinguistics work offers insight into the linguistic and interactional processes involved SNS use. Using concepts from superdiversity and audience design theories, he shows that the multiple audiences facing an SNS user afford “context collapse”, resulting in multilingual and multimodal language style strategies that localize, maximize, and partition audiences. Implications are that online conversation norms vary considerably from offline norms, and that language style and choice in SNS contexts may be shaped by the tension between needs for both intimacy and publicness in online interaction. Androutsopoulos’s study represents the sort of work to which researchers and practitioners of L2TL in SNS might turn for interdisciplinary cross-pollination, for example, as a framework for analysis of SNS-mediated L2 learner interaction.

**SNS-mediated L2 pedagogy**

The application of vernacular SNSs in L2 instruction may be due to techno-enthusiasm among CALL practitioners wishing to leverage the popularity of the latest technology for the sake of motivating students. Considering there is sometimes resistance among students who feel “low” technologies like SNSs are being wrongly co-opted for formal “high” purposes like academics (e.g. Reinhardt and Zander, 2011), there may be some truth in that criticism. However, practitioners have also recognized the potential in “bridging” out-of-school practices into an awareness of language use as personally and socially relevant cultural practice (Thorne and Reinhardt, 2008). Common research findings speak to the
challenges of balancing the learning benefits emergent from the user-driven agency of everyday vernacular SNS use with the demands to meet formal curriculum-driven objectives.

As per the norm, early work was theoretical and discussed potential benefits and drawbacks. For example, McBride (2009) discussed the pedagogical possibilities of SNS, focusing on their potential to motivate younger “digital natives” and afford the developmental benefits of “writing/remixing the self” in a socio-communicative context. Predicting soon-to-appear work, she noted the potential of SNSs for the development of socio-pragmatic competence and as an environment for simulation pedagogy. McBride also emphasized the challenge that forcing learners to friend one another and the teacher might de-authenticate the experience and negate the benefits deriving from autonomous, self-organized learning.

Notable work has also identified the potential of SNS to foster socio-collaborative learning, develop socio-pragmatic competence, and afford intercultural learning and exchange. For example, Blattner and Fiori (2009) argued that L2 learners can develop a sense of belonging to a learning community through observation of, and participation in, authentic Facebook group discussions in the language of study, since those discussions may provide critical counterexamples to the academic or invented language samples of textbooks. In a 2011 application of their assertion, Blattner and Fiori had L2 Spanish learners observe, document, and analyze various functions of, Spanish use in authentic Facebook groups, specifically the variety of greetings and leave-takings, unique abbreviations, and cultural references in wall posts. Learners reported the development of cultural and metalinguistic awareness, particularly regarding pragmatic variance among CMC registers. The researchers also note the applicability and transferability of the literacies and analytic skills developed through such activities to other media and contexts.

Other research has implied that the SNS affordance for socio-collaborative learning community development may be due to its accessibility outside of formal contexts—an implication perhaps facilitated by the fact that the studies looked at Twitter, which was initially designed to be more mobile and “push” focused than Facebook. For example, Antenos-Conforti (2009) had L2 Italian learners use Twitter to interact with their classmates both in and outside of class. Learners used the tool not only for the assigned tasks but also to help one another, and reported satisfaction at being able to use and interact in the L2 authentically in non-classroom domains. In a similar, more empirical study, Lomicka and Lord (2012) had L2 French learners use Twitter to interact with each other and with native speakers. The researchers analyzed the learners’ tweets for social presence, defined as “the degree to which the participants can present themselves, both socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people in their online community” and theorized to be prerequisite to development of a learning community (Garrison et al., 2000, in Lomicka and Lord, 2012, p. 51). In their analysis they found evidence for the interaction, emotion, and self-disclosure that indicate some degree of social presence. The native speakers did not tweet nearly as much as the learners, which the authors ascribe to the optional nature of
the tasks for them, that is, a misalignment of tasks sometimes difficult to avoid in telecollaborative exchanges.

Other pedagogical research has leveraged SNS popularity and utility more directly for the purpose of telecollaborative intercultural exchange and learning. Findings are that learners may gain cultural understandings through processes of socialization that involve collaborative negotiation of community, agency, and identity, all the while balancing informal use with formal learning demands. For example, using Norton’s concept of identity investment, Klimanova and Dembovskaya (2013) examined how L2 Russian learners and native Russian speakers enacted various identities in the Russian SNS VKontakte. Employing “digital wisdom” (Prensky, 2009 in Klimanova and Dembovskaya, 2013, p. 69), some participants were able to overcome the limitations of low proficiency and invest in the “social enhancements” (p. 83) afforded by the SNS, for example, by privileging particular sign systems, construing certain identities, and strategically interacting with partners.

Liaw and English (2013) report on a telecollaboration project between English learners in Taiwan and France who completed formal exchange tasks of introduction and art commentary on an official school SNS, but then independently set up a Facebook group to actually socialize and informally learn about each others’ culture. Using an innovative approach to analyze textual features quantitatively and to examine the systemic-functional field, tenor, and mode of learner production and interaction qualitatively, the researchers found that language in the formal SNS was less interpersonal and textual than language in the informal one, which tended to have more academic qualities, even the presumably interpersonal self-introductions. The authors suggest that it may have been the very unsanctioned quality of the informal SNS that afforded experiential cultural learning and the use, and ultimately learning, of vernacular, non-academic domains. Implications are to encourage and facilitate informal and organic connections, although perhaps in a “hands-off” manner.

Recognizing that the range of discourse types, registers, and genres inherent to vernacular SNS use is not easily accessed through traditional L2 pedagogy, other research-practitioners have used SNSs for role play and situated learning activities. Integrating SNSs with global simulation and situated learning pedagogy principles, Mills (2011) developed and implemented Facebook-mediated instruction for advanced French learners. Over a semester, students developed simulated characters and interacted through them online, thereby gaining awareness of genre, register, voice, and identity. Mills analyzes the emergent learning as reflective of the joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire afforded by the interplay of the SNS and the situated, contextualized nature of the instruction.

Working with intermediate L2 Korean learners, Reinhardt and Ryu (2013) developed and implemented a series of bridging activities (Thorne and Reinhardt, 2008) involving SNS-based alternate identity role play, the purpose of which was to
develop social-network mediated literacy and language awareness as well as offer learners to voice perspectives and use socio-grammatical linguistic structures they could not using their true identities. Learners first observed and analyzed snippets of expert Facebook interactions for samples of CMC register and socio-pragmatic lexico-grammar—for example, particles and tense uses that indexed relational status between author and addressee. In tasks designed to elicit newly learned language, learners then role played invented characters interacting through Facebook posts. They then analyzed their classmates’ role played production and identified socio-pragmatic uses, discussing whether and why the language used was appropriate, and whether it fit with the character’s social status in relation to the addressee.

**SNSs designed for language learning**

While many people are learning languages informally and perhaps formally with vernacular SNSs, many are also using SNSsLL—SNSs designed specifically for language learning purposes. Definitional issues again come to the fore with SNSsLL, since most are combinations of self-study tutorials enhanced with social network features, and as commercial products they evolve, impacting user-learner experiences. As of this writing, older SNSsLL like Palabea have gone defunct, but Speaky has just started. Of more established SNSsLL, Lang-8 claims 750,000 members, Livemocha claims 12 million, Babbel claims 20 million, and Busuu claims 50 million. Most of these sites have yet to be examined objectively and empirically by L2LT researchers, except for Livemocha, perhaps because it is one of the oldest.

Findings mostly critique site design through usability testing, and show that most users are often well aware of poor design and when social networking features do not afford L2 learning—for example, poor profile design may lead to the inability for other users to know whether a fellow user is truly qualified as an expert, or if he is just looking for a good time (Stevenson and Liu, 2010). Findings echo those of research on vernacular SNS-mediated L2 use, learning, and pedagogy—that SNSs may afford the practice of identity and agency and the development of socio-collaborative learning through the processes of socialization, but with the added point that site design should actively afford these activities as they relate to language learning. Implications speak to whether and to what degree independent, autonomous L2 learning with these sites can leverage the ecological affordances of informal vernacular SNS-mediated learning, while seamlessly incorporating more formal, and effective, instructional practices.

In a relatively early descriptive piece, Harrison and Thomas (2009) traced the experiences of six L2 learners who used Livemocha. Utilizing boyd and Ellison’s (2007) conceptualization of SNS identity, the researchers found the site afforded self-presentation, network management, community participation, and ultimately L2 learning in ways that appealed to some but not to others. The authors imply that socio-collaborative L2 learning can only emerge in SNSsLL if sites afford learners individualized means to cultivate, manage and develop identities and networks,
over periods longer than a semester. Similarly, Clark and Gruba (2010) also evaluate *Livemocha* features, but by describing their own experiences using the site to learn L2 Korean and Japanese. While some features led to motivation, like making friends or successful task completion, others led to frustration and demotivation, like outdated methods, usability issues, and a sense of doing busy work.

Other research has examined how resourceful learners may use SNSsLL successfully, perhaps in spite of site design. For example, framing development of sociopragmatic competence as matter of language socialization, Gonzales (2013) uses conversation analysis to examine how an L2 Spanish learner manages rapport in *Livemocha*. While the site’s chat tool includes supportive resources like a translator, a keyboard with non-English characters and emoticons, and a list of suggested topics, the learner did not use these and instead successfully established rapport with his interlocutor through humor, small talk, textualized paralanguage, and shared cultural reference.

Research on specific elements of SNSsLL design holds the most promise for truly informing improved iterations, especially when it correlates those elements directly with activities key to L2 learning. For example, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques, Zourou and Loiseau (2013) analyzed the design of the culture section of *Livemocha*, noting how the lack of, or poorly conceived, SNS features led to inconvenience and difficulty for the user, and thwarted language-focused interaction and networking.

**Problems and difficulties**

In brief, research on SNSs in L2 education has found evidence that L2 learners exercise considerable agency and diversity of linguistic and symbolic practice in informal SNS contexts, making strategic use of site affordances to self-present, design identities, and socialize and be socialized into local, home, and global communities. In formal SNS contexts researchers have found potential for the development of socio-collaborative learning community, socio-pragmatic competence, and metalinguistic and intercultural awareness. However, the question whether or not the emergent, self-organizing learning activity seen in everyday SNS use can be fully leveraged for more formal purposes still remains to be fully answered.

Challenges remain in both research and practice. In view of the mixed and comprehensive methodologies often employed, the vernacular, ubiquitous, and often ephemeral nature of SNS use poses challenges to researchers, especially in addressing privacy issues and gaining access to, collecting, and curating data. In implementing SNS-mediated instruction, difficulties may arise because learners have developed particular styles and cultures-of-use associated with vernacular contexts that clash with formal applications. Instructors should anticipate resistance and seek not only to ameliorate it—for example, by not forcing a student to use their real profile, or by not requiring that tweets be sent over the weekend—but also to
use it to raise awareness of the potentials of cognizant SNS use for autonomous and collaborative L2 learning. Finally, researchers of SNSsLL also face the challenge of gaining access to private companies while risking being shut out because of their critiques.

**Future directions**

It is undeniable that SNS use has become global everyday practice—as of this writing, over a fifth of all living humans, nearly 1.6 billion, have profiles on Facebook. Among US users, the 2014 Pew Internet report shows shifting trends, as Facebook growth has slowed to account for around three quarters of all users, while other platforms have gained users—about one quarter for LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, and Twitter combined—with Facebook gaining older users, Pinterest trending towards women, over half of users under age 30 favoring Instagram, and over half of all using multiple platforms. Research opportunities abound if one asks why and how these trends have developed, what tensions and synergies they afford, and what they imply for L2LT—for example, Instagram reflects a favoritism towards visual representation and multimodal semiotics that would seem to have great potential for culture learning, but also challenge traditional notions of literacy.

One direction forward is to focus on where SNSs differ from previous Internet technologies and concomitant social paradigm shifts. Drawing from O’Reilly’s conceptualization of Web 2.0 as both technological and ideological (Musser et al., 2007, in Zourou, 2012), Zourou maintains that the ethos emerging from new SNS-mediated socio-communicative interactions, social configurations, and socio-literacies deserve closer attention—an ethos of user participation focused on sharing and re-use, the open source ethos afforded by Web 2.0 architecture, and a new ethos of social value and capital emergent from network effects like virality and social network “shaming”. Implications of these trends for education, especially as it faces neo-liberal corporatization pressures to commodify learning as a product, are worth consideration.

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