



Managing synchronous polyfocality in new media/new learning: Online language educators' instructional strategies



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ABSTRACT

As more formal academic coursework moves online, especially to synchronous, multi-modal sessions, the issue of directing and ensuring learner attention becomes particularly problematic. Polyfocality – individual and group attention distributed between and among information and communication sources and their varying modalities – becomes particularly challenging for online language education. This study set out to determine what instructional strategies online instructors are employing during their live conferencing sessions to meet such challenges. Seven online Russian language educators were interviewed concerning their practices. These instructors report instructional strategies that are addressed in the context of new media and new learning practice.

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1. Introduction

Diffuse human attention as a consequence of continuous digital connectivity represents new challenges for educators (Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009). This view sees contemporary digital learners as having been conditioned by recreational multitasking and the frenetic jumping of modalities. Such observations are particularly relevant to language education as experienced language educators rely a great deal on successfully reading learners' attending and comprehending behaviors in live classrooms; behaviors that are visually and aurally registered (Gorham, 1988). Verbal and non-verbal information – gestures, eye contact, affective cues – facilitate instructor signaling and responding to signs of attending and non-attending in instructionally productive ways with attendant moment-by-moment assessments of language learning a central characteristic of language teaching and learning dynamics (Meskill, 2010; Poehner, 2008).

In the brief history of online teaching and learning, it is widely understood that moving epistemologies and routines from brick and mortar classrooms to online venues is not pedagogically productive (Anderson, 2008). Because internet-based digital learning environments are fundamentally different, attempts at mimicking face to face instruction online are far from productive for both teachers and students. What, then, are the particular instructional designs and dynamics of synchronous language teaching and learning online that make sense to educators? In our attempt to systematically document language educators' instructional practices in synchronous online sessions along with their underlying new media/new learning epistemologies, we probed online instructors' experiences accordingly.

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2. Perspective

The perspective that guides this inquiry aligns with current shifts in language education away from focusing on discrete activity inside learners' heads to broader, contextual influences that shape socially and culturally mediated learning experience (Block, 2003; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Ortega, 2011). As a means of entrance into the socially mediated practices of online language educators, we take as a point of departure a *new media and new learning* approach to this phenomenon (henceforth "new media/new learning" to reflect conceptual interdependence). We thus employ the four dimensions that Cope and Kalantzis (2007) have proposed in addressing new digital teaching and learning: *design*, *pluralism*, *synaesthesia*, and *pedagogy*.

According to Cope and Kalantzis, the first dimension of new media/new learning, *design*, means that teachers and learners become designers, no longer deliverers and acquirers, of content. Both are agents of educating processes. With new media, teachers become co-designers of new knowledge and new forms of understanding alongside their students. The second dimension of the new learning, *pluralism*, is not only essential in an age of global connectivity and community building but also acknowledges the dynamism of learners and learning; this view does not, for instance, see individual or group traits as static, but rather as ever-shifting and developing in complex interaction with the world. The third dimension of new learning, *synaesthesia*, is the melding of perception between and among visual, aural and textual modalities. Cope and Kalantzis argue that this dimension of synaesthesia warrants investigation as it is now an intrinsic aspect of planning for, examining, and evaluating contemporary educational goals and processes. Finally, the dimension of *pedagogy* sees the active, co-constructing of learning as central especially as the learning is manifest in the higher-order shaping of new media's "cartographies and its grammars" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2007, p. 79). In short, this shift to new media/new learning sees educators and their learners as designers, builders, producers and critical evaluators of content, rather than receivers of pre-packaged content. This key perspective shapes our inquiry into Russian language teacher beliefs and practices regarding their online instruction in synchronous multimodal environments.

This study's perspective also shares a social perspective in keeping with the synthesis of theoretical shifts outlined by Ortega (2011) and Block's social turn (2003) in second language acquisition research. In analyzing the historical shift away from conceptualizing second language learning as predominantly psychological toward a more socially-based account, these scholars identify those perspectives shared among a number of SLA theoreticians who view learning processes as socially mediated. Because we are concerned with student attending in highly social multimodal environments, nested within the framework of new media/new learning through social processes we concurrently situate our research using Jones' construct of multimodal polyfocality, the complimentary and competing splits in focus so prevalent in 21st human digital activity (Jones, 2004).

When we point something out to someone, our intention is to change the focus of attention and mental state of that individual (Tomaselto, Carpenter, & Liszkowski, 2007). When the pointer (in online learning this is most often the teacher) points during synchronous online sessions, she has limited ways of detecting if and how students' attention is impacted as a result of her directing. Mutual attending, then, is potentially problematic. Indeed, by virtue of the environment, synchronous online instruction radically alters the common perceptual field of interactants and thus the discourse of referring that works best (Hanks, 1992). The aspect of polyfocality is thus a central concern for our inquiry into teacher practices in new media/new learning. Fig. 1 (below) represents the theoretical stance for the inquiry.

Our theoretical perspective has each of Cope and Kalantzis' four broad elements of a new media/new learning perspective while also considering component interests particular to synchronous online language education processes: 1) second language learning social processes; and, within these processes, 2) the element of multimodal polyfocality. Thus, within the broader concept of new media/new learning, focus is trained on SLA processes and, further, within these the polyfocality inherent in synchronous language education. Our theoretical perspective, as represented in Fig. 1, guided conceptualization of this inquiry's focus, method and analysis of online educator interview data. We thereby explored the concepts and strategies

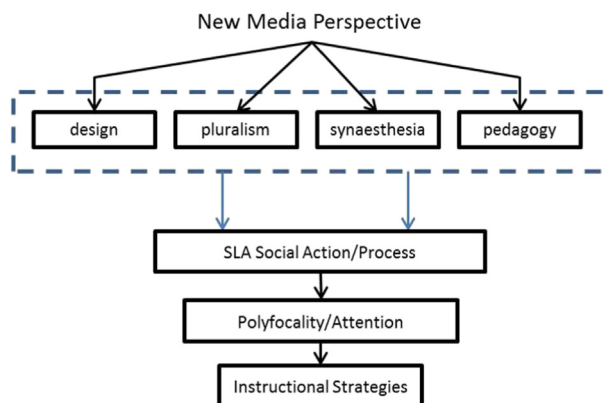


Fig. 1. Theoretical perspective.

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