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The learner-context interface: Emergent issues of affect and identity in technology-mediated language learning spaces

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ABSTRACT

In this article we argue that inquiry into digital language learning needs to be extended and refocused by adopting a larger frame of the process, one that incorporates recent calls for studies focusing on the interplay of language, agent and environment in the language learning process (Dörnyei, 2009). To do this we revisit the learner-context interface theory of language learning (White 1999, 2003, 2005), to investigate learner encounters with technology-mediated learning spaces in terms of emergent issues of affect and identity. Data is gathered from two focal participants who are advanced learners of Spanish as they participate in voluntary, non-assessed Adobe Connect role-play sessions via videoconferencing; archival data, stimulated recall reports, learner diaries and tutor journals comprise the data set. Findings focus on the complex and mutually-constitutive relationship between technology-mediated language learning contexts, learners as individual agents, and the nature and influence of the interface they develop with the learning context. Conclusions align with contemporary concerns to bridge the gap between the interior worlds of language learners and their social worlds, identifying how affect and identity are implicated in those processes.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade the landscape and sites for technology-mediated language learning have continued to expand and evolve, and now include multiple, diverse arenas which learners can enter, spend time in, move on from, and return to at will, according to their individual needs and agendas. Such arenas include YouTube (with audience participation through comment features), blogs, Facebook, Skype, Second Life, digital gaming and innumerable sites tailored to language learning (such as Busuu, Duolingo, Livemocha, mylanguageexchange, ScuttlePad). As the tools, mediums, systems and structures for technology-mediated language learning have developed, there has at the same time been an expanding research focus within the wider field of applied linguistics: new questions have arisen in which the emic lens of participants is significant, where there is a concern with individuals as much as groups, where attention is paid to variability in human and social phenomena, and where there is a search for particular rather than generalizable explanations of language learning. Importantly, this widening of focus has extended out from formal, more prescribed learning environments, to include students' lifeworlds and their more private, informal, off-the-record learning experiences. The kinds of informal digital learning experiences that emerged initially escaped notice, but have now come to be regarded as important sites for enquiry into language learning.

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These informal moments, these behind-the-scenes, off-the-record experiences, often initiated by learners, engage their identities and fuel their language learning in ways that we are only beginning to understand. Interestingly too they are experiences that students choose to access and engage with, and, in many cases, become places students decide to linger at, to contribute to, and revisit, in the course of their daily lives. Other important shifts in perspective have come from this research: for example, while an early focus in technology-mediated language teaching was on the affordances and constraints of different online environments, it was only much later that the contribution of learners and teachers to those affordances and constraints began to be recognised as an important area of enquiry.

Research tools and paradigms were developed to enquire into these very new ways of learning language through three main lenses: a focus on the context (variously called programmes, mediums, environments, spaces and so on), the learner (preferences, motivation, persistence, inhibiting factors and so on), and the target language (language use, focus on form, interactive competence, evidence of developing proficiency and so on). A substantial body of knowledge has been developed in online distance language learning, meaning we have a much clearer sense of features of technology-mediated distance language learning environments (see for example Guichon, 2010; Wang & Chen, 2009), target language use in those environments (often from interactionist and conversational analysis perspectives, as in Tudini, 2013), and the role of particular learner contributions (see for example Arispe & Blake, 2012). We can now turn to a more complex and complete view of language learning by exploring the dynamic interaction between the learner, the context, and the target language. To do this we draw on early theoretical work in distance language learning, the learner-context interface theory (White, 1999, 2003, 2005), and extend it to include an analysis of a third dimension, that is language use, thus enabling us to capture the interplay of language, agent and context in technology-mediated language learning. This approach aligns with, but is not framed by, recent inquiry into language as a complex adaptive system within an agent-based framework (Dörnyei, 2009; Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006). To investigate the interplay between language, agent and environment, we analyse micro-episodes from within a series of Adobe Connect role plays, with attention to the target language, the environment as it develops, and emergent issues of identity and affect. Here it is argued that individual characteristics and contributions can be understood more deeply, if we also see them in relation to particular temporal and contextual factors. We extend this focus further by anchoring observations in actual moments of target language use. The unique data sets available in digital settings, in this case videoconferencing, together with stimulated recall tools, make possible a very close following of the interplay of language, agent and environment. To begin, and as further background to the study, we put forward a view of everyday technologies as contemporary dwelling places for language learning.

2. Digital spaces as contemporary dwelling places for language learning

Technology-mediated environments for language learning moved quite rapidly from being more marginal, specialised places for language learning, relying on custom-made materials, to being more open spaces, closely linked to the everyday worlds and technologies of users. A notable example came from the work of Tudini (2003) where the use of CMC tools by intermediate distance learners of Italian was extended into participation in public native speaker chat rooms; she details how, within the formal learning settings of the course, the virtual chatting acted as a gateway to target language communities and provided 'an authentic and purposeful cross-cultural experience' (p. 157). At around the same time research began to identify ways in which students themselves were highly agentive in deploying everyday tools and technologies in the course of their language learning, often in a seamless way. In a bilingual telecollaborative project between students in Germany and New Zealand, for example, students collaborated using a wide range of communication tools, both voice and text, including chat, asynchronous discussion forums and wikis; however very rapidly they incorporated other everyday tools such as Facebook and YouTube (Vom Brocke, White, Walker & Vom Brocke (2003). In their evaluations they noted that Facebook and YouTube were sites they visited and spent time in to recharge and enjoy using their other language(s). In other words, those sites became personally meaningful dwelling places for their everyday lives, as well as for language learning, linked to time and place: this was articulated very clearly by one of the students as she said 'I connected as often as I could - I'd wake up, go online, check it out … and again after work … I'd have their videos playing in the kitchen as I was making dinner … just a part of what I do every day'. Esch and Zähner (2000) had earlier argued that 'whether ICTs become part of individuals' language learning environment depends on the strength of the boundaries which individuals have created for themselves as language learners' (p. 5). However, as yet we still know relatively little about what those boundaries might be, how they function, and how they may relate to emergent issues of affect and identity in technology-mediated spaces. While a great deal of research has focused on the affordances of different technology-mediated environments (Blake, 2013; Levy, 2009), we have much less insight into how those affordances are perceived and used by learners in particular moments, and to what effect. Central to the stance of this article is that affordances are not fixed, predetermined attributes that will be automatically recognised by individuals. Rather, taking a more ecological perspective, and as Thoms (2014) notes, 'it is out of a learner's social activity and awareness that affordances arise in language learning contexts'. The aim of this paper is to uncover some of the moment-by-moment complexities and affordances of the interplay of language, agent and environment from the perspective of participants; the setting is a voluntary out-of-class session via videoconferencing, where students used Spanish through a series of role plays. While the sessions were linked to university classes (in terms of participants, for example), here we draw attention to the ways in which the digital spaces functioned as informal settings for the participants, linked to their everyday lifeworlds and identities. In the next section we outline the theoretical framework for the study.

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