L2 Learners' Informal Online Interactions in Social Network Communities

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Abstract. This paper reports on a study on the use of social network sites (SNSs) designed for L2 learning, such as *Livemocha* and *Busuu*, where learners autonomously seek opportunities for authentic interaction in spontaneous ways. The study consists in a longitudinal multiple case study approach to investigate learners' informal online interactions taking place in the SNSs. This paper will focus on the results related to the analysis of learners' interactions and to whether the construction of learning opportunities is fostered or impeded by the social dimension that is intrinsic in these communities. The objectives are to learn more about the dynamics and the behaviours enacted by learners with reference to the online interaction with peers, and to explore the role played by the social aspect and its relationship with the learning aspect. To attain these objectives, the paper analyses intercultural, open-ended, dyadic conversations occurring between learners and native speakers (NSs), and learners and non-native speakers (NNSs) in the semi-instructional context of these learning communities and in the absence of teachers and pedagogical tasks. Drawing on socio-cultural approaches, the paper also raises central issues that are related to the surrounding environment of online language learners, such as roles' definition, learners' identity, scaffolding and peer-assistance (macro-level). It then applies these issues to key-concepts in SLA, such as turn-taking, language selection, language alternation, repair strategies and noticing (micro-level). The data collection includes semi-structured interaction interviews and a wide and variegated corpus data consisting of textual private messages and emails, audio and video recordings and textual chats analysed respectively through virtual ethnography and Conversation Analysis (CA). The preliminary results provide insights on learners' ability or inability to manage both the social and the pedagogical trajectories simultaneously. These deliveries are expected to shed more light on their interaction patterns and to provide a better understanding of recent lifelong L2 learning practices in the naturalistic and out-of-class contexts of online communities.

Keywords: social network sites, online language learning, learner's autonomy, CALL.

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1. Introduction

Relevant studies have found that informal interaction of L2 learners with native speakers increase their self-confidence and willingness to use the L2, which has a positive effect on L2 learning (Archangeli, 1999; Stoller, Hodges, & Kimbrough, 1995; Yorozu, 2001). Tarone (1997, 2007), for example, argues that it is necessary to study L2 learning in natural settings for everyday communication and in the natural contexts of their social networks.

Some other studies (Haruhara, 1992; Kurata, 2004a, 2004b, 2011; Neustupný, 1995) have gone further and focused on the exploration of learners' interactions in their informal social networks looking at the characteristics and at the effects of these informal networks on L2 learning. Through the analysis of the interactive discourse that spontaneously occurred among learners in their social networks, they found that it is important for both learners and NSs to be provided with basic knowledge about how to interact with each other, when to offer assistance, how to take turns, and how to show difficulty in comprehending each other's utterances. These studies, in general, strengthen the idea of the positive features of informal social networks in terms of L2 learning.

With the spread of the Internet and social network sites in particular, the network concept has become an even more powerful analytical tool for better understanding of the dynamics of learners seeking opportunities to use the L2 outside of the classroom and in informal contexts. This study looks at the intercultural online chats among L2 learners in the dimension of online social networks designed specifically for language learning and will show how learners adopt specific strategies to offer or receive assistance in the target language (TL) and how they are engaged in both the social and the learning trajectory.

2. Method

2.1. The participants

The study employed a longitudinal ethnographic multiple case study to analyze learners' perceptions and behaviours within their experience of online social networks for L2 learning. The social networks selected for the study are *Livemocha* and *Busuu*. Some of the participants for the study were recruited by means of an online questionnaire sent to the members of the former of these online communities. The other participants were selected drawing on the researcher's personal acquaintances and contacts and by contacting people at random in both the online communities. The participants to this study are mainly NSs and NNSs of English, Spanish and Italian.

A wide range of qualitative methods have been adopted, including the online survey, the collection of samples of interactive discourse occurring in online social networks,

and semi-structured interviews. In this way, the methodological triangulation allowed the cross-checking of the data collected, improving further internal validity.

2.2. Data collection

The data used in this study are of several kinds: audio-tape recording, excerpts from online chats, some diary entries by the interactants, semi-structured interviews and interaction interviews with the participants. Semi-structured interviews aimed to elicit information about if and how learners are able to take advantage of their learning experience in these social networks, and what their goals and motives are before and during their experience in the communities.

After this type of interview, interaction interviews followed. They consisted in very specific questions about speech events occurring in participants' interactions (Kurata, 2011; Neustupný, 2003). They were useful for understanding whether when interacting with both NSs and NNSs of their TL in the communities, learners are active and aware of their language use and of the assistance they autonomously provide and offer each other. While interviews were transcribed, codified and analyzed through *Atlas.ti*, the audio interaction data were transcribed according to CA conventions.

3. Discussion

Table 1 illustrates an online chat between Nastya, a NS of Russian, one of the interviewees, with her language partner, Tom, an American boy she met on *Livemocha*. In this excerpt the conversation between the two occurs only in English. As Nastya explained during the interview, no code-switching occurred since they agreed on using English to interact. This was due to the very basic level of Russian of Tom and to Nastya's strong intention of improving her language skills, having planned a stay in the US.

Table 1.   Excerpt

1	N:	well it's funny but I also like hills))) *[heels]* even though I'm tall sometimes I wear it))))
2	T:	hahaha
3	T:	yes, heels are nice too))
4	N:	sorry
5	N:	heels)))
6	T:	LOL
7	T:	its ok
8	T:	i was confused at first (rofl)

The excerpt above illustrates a repair sequence where embedded correction occurs. Embedded correction is usually opposed to explicit correction and it consists in inexplicit indirect feedback (Gass, 1997; Tudini, 2010) not to interrupt the conversational flow. It

permits interactants to correct with discretion and it is considered as the least likely to draw learners' attention to the formal aspects of a conversation (Tudini, 2010). As the excerpt will show, in this conversation the implicit correction allows the maintenance of the social trajectory.

In this chat session Nastya and Tom are engaged in an activity that is informal social interaction and are driven by the motive of intertwining their social relationship. On the other hand, as the interview further confirmed, there is another activity that Nastya is carrying out, language learning, driven by the motive of achieving a more proficient level of English. These motives shape the relationship between Nastya and Tom and the definition of their roles during their online interactions, being Nastya the novice and Tom the expert of the TL.

In line 1 the NNS produces the incorrect object [hills] and makes a spelling mistake. In line 2 the NS maintains the social trajectory replying the previous turn and does not interrupt the flow of the conversation. Moreover, he appears to be aware of the sensitivity of his interlocutor and, in order not to affect Nastya's identity and self-image as a proficient learner of the L2 (Kurata, 2011), in line 3 he makes the correction "on the fly". In other words, Tom produces the alternative [heels] without interrupting the conversational flow and by reincorporating the correct word in an interpersonal rather than pedagogical trajectory. In this way online participants keep their inter-subjectivity and both social and learning trajectories are maintained (Tudini, 2010).

The visual saliency (Tudini, 2010) typical of online interaction helps both of them and in particular the NNS in noticing her mistake, as the apologizing word in line 4 demonstrates. The apologizing sequence is followed by another sequence (line 5) where the NNS produces the alternative correct [heels]. The correct pushed output concludes the repair and starts a mitigation sequence in line 6 where the NS makes use of irony and of the chat acronym LOL (standing for "Laughing Out Loud"). Later, in line 7, Tom mitigates and softens the embedded correction, and in line 8 he provides a justification for his correction by completing the mitigation sequence with another ironic acronym, ROFL (standing for "Rolling On the Floor Laughing").

The abbreviations (LOL in turn 6 and ROFL in turn 8) display a playful attitude of proximity towards the learner's error and, at the same time, provide an adequate conclusion to this successful repair sequence. It is also worthy to underline that this excerpt shows a feature that is typical of online chats, that is, the presence of typographical, spelling and grammatical errors made by NSs, which are usually not corrected. In this case, "its" (line 7) should be spelled as "it's" or "it is" in order not to generate confusion between the neuter form of the English possessive personal pronoun and the conjugation of the neuter third-person singular of the verb "to be". These mistakes might create problems with less proficient NNS than the learner of this online chat.

4. Conclusions

As the excerpt discussed earlier shows, in the informal context of online social networks, conversational events like non-understanding, assistance-seeking and assistance-provision are authentic rather than pedagogically motivated. This study confirms what previous studies have already outlined (Pasfield-Neoufitou, 2007a, 2007b, 2009; Tudini, 2010): that online chat interactions have a potential for SLA. Moreover, the study reveals that learners display a high level of autonomy in the careful selection and creation of their own personal online network as well as in the management of their own learning, with pedagogical repair trajectories mainly coexisting with social ones.

A limitation of this study is the lack of a proper longitudinal approach to learners' online discourse. In other words, it would be useful to track whether learners show apperceived input and whether they are able to incorporate the correct utterance meaningfully in their interactions and employ it across several chat sessions. Nevertheless, it is very difficult to obtain online conversations at time distance from the same participants since their participation is totally voluntary.

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