

The socially networked language learner: implications for tertiary language education

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This paper investigates tertiary language students' experiences of the social networking site Facebook for out-of-class language exposure. It draws on the findings of a larger study on the use of Facebook for informal language learning, and focuses on 1) the connections between language students and their native speaker Facebook friends, 2) students' digital writing practices and 3) students' perceptions of the value of informal learning on Facebook as opposed to classroom-based formal study. The findings of the study indicate a disconnect between informal and formal learning practices and suggestions will be provided to bridge this gap.

Keywords: language learning, social networking sites, informal learning, higher education

Introduction

Most tertiary language students in New Zealand have one thing in common: They are on Facebook and they have Facebook friends who are native speakers of the language they study (table 1). Opportunities for "adding" native speakers are numerous, helped by the growing mobility of language students through exchange programmes. Take Ben (pseudonym), a 3rd year Japanese student:

after returning from a 6-month exchange in Yokohama, Japan, I ended up with hundreds of new Japanese friends, many of whom were keen to keep in touch afterwards. ... Needless to say, I have spent many days and nights online chatting with my exchange friends in Japanese. (quoted with permission)

While it would be difficult to measure Ben's language development it would be fair to say that his Japanese is benefitting from these chatting sessions. Sockett and Toffoli (2013) have observed unexpected language gains in language students, which they explain by their involvement in such informal online language practice.

This paper investigates the use of Facebook for informal second language (L2) practice and how it relates to formal language instruction.

Multilingual Facebook

Facebook, with 1.32 billion users is currently the most widely used social networking site (SNS). Ten years of social networking activity have shown that trends change. Once popular SNSs such as *MySpace* or *bebo* already seem to be a thing of the past. Similarly, SNSs used in countries outside of the United States such as *StudiVZ* (Germany), *Mixi* (Japan) or *Orkut* (Brazil) are losing members or are shutting down. As social network users from around the world are migrating to Facebook – over 80% of people on Facebook live outside the USA and Canada - the SNS adjusts to this global market. Language settings are now available in 70 languages and automated translations are offered for posts in different languages. This multilingual global arena enables language learners to communicate both with their immediate social circles and with their friends in different parts of the world. (All statistical information on the use of Facebook in this paragraph is taken from <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>)

Informal language learning

Informal learning

Chances are that Ben does not go on Facebook to practice his Japanese but to talk to his friends. The language practice occurs nevertheless but is not tied to "curricular and evaluative consequences" (Meskill, Guan & Ryu 2012, p. 1138) and is therefore considered to be informal learning. Ben might notice new words or expressions during his conversations but most of his learning will be incidental and non-conscious. While chatting with his Japanese friends, he is not a language *learner* but a language *user*, engaging in personal conversations. Informal learning is, according to the *European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*:

Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning is mostly unintentional from the learner's perspective (p. 74).

Informal language

Chances are that Ben is also using informal language. Chat is a written mode of communication with the characteristics of oral conversation. It is considered informal, as opposed to the formal writing style used in university assignments and essays. Chatting can also involve specific online writing conventions, also referred to as "netspeak" (Crystal 2001). Thorne and Reinhardt (2008) use the term "digital vernacular" to describe texts that are shaped by the affordances of online communication channels. Facebook chat (person to person, group, parallel), asynchronous private message, status update and commenting have "unique interactional, discourse, and genre features" (Reinhardt 2013, np) and their use will develop specific language skills in L2 learners.

The omnipresence of Facebook in the lives of language students has, of course, caught the attention of language teachers, many of whom are Facebook-users themselves. Promnitz-Hayashi (2011) for example, had ESL students in Japan set up Facebook profiles and interact with each other in a secret group. Blattner and Fiori (2011) got their Spanish students in the United States to explore conversations of native speakers in Facebook groups with the aim of raising their sociopragmatic awareness for native speaker online practices. In another study (Mills 2011) students of French set up simulated Facebook profiles to engage in joint tasks. These activities reflect the sense of innovation and creativity of teacher-researchers and their recognition of the value of informal learning environments and digital practices. These interventions have been classified as formal use of Facebook (Lamy 2013; Meskill, Guan & Ryu 2012) because they are an integrated part of language lessons. Further, they are based on pedagogical assumptions, and not on the online experiences of language students.

The socially networked language learner

To shed light on the actual online practices of language learners, some results of a larger study on online informal language learning will be presented. The original study investigated the perceptions of 191 language students (Chinese, French, German, Japanese and Spanish) of Facebook as a space for out-of-class L2 exposure and practice. This overview focuses on the relationship between language students and their native speaker friends, the students' writing practices and their perceptions of Facebook versus classroom-based language learning.

Language students and their Native Speaker Facebook Friends

As mentioned in the introductory paragraph, most intermediate and advanced language students are on Facebook and have Facebook friends from the language they study (NSFBBF). Most of these connections result from time spent in the target language country during a high school or university exchange. These language students also met many native speakers in New Zealand. 50 of the 60 comments referred to encounters with native speakers in their immediate environment: they had met native speakers during their exchange to New Zealand, at school and at university, while traveling or working, through friends and family, at parties, in church or at a tramping club - only one of them indicated that they had met them online through other Facebook friends. The social networking site was perceived as a tool to maintain these relationships after native speakers had returned to their countries or the language students had returned home from their exchange.

Table 1: Native speaker Facebook friends and language exchange at different language levels (n = 179)

	Combined	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
Do you have Facebook friends who are native speakers of the language you study?				
Yes	86.8%	77.4%	88.9%	96.7%
No	13.2%	22.6%	11.1%	3.3%
How have you met these native speakers?				
Language exchange	77.5%	67.9%	82.6%	80.0%
University language match programme	16.2%	10.7%	13.0%	20.0%
Holiday	34.2%	46.4%	32.6%	32.0%
Other (please specify)	60	13	27	20

Use of online writing spaces and digital writing practices

For communications with their NSFBF, participants preferred the use of the private channels - chat or private message - over public announcements and interactions through posts and comments. However, chatting was perceived as difficult for conversations with European NSFBFs because of the 12 hour time difference from New Zealand.

A couple of times a week we will have a conversation when we are both awake, so either very early or late.

My friends with whom I communicate with in the languages that I study, we prefer to communicate using the private message system, rather than posting on a each others wall because of the benefit of it being more private. I would almost always then write my messages to them in their native language.

Participants described their online language generally as informal, using colloquialisms and slang, and typical online practices such as the use of acronyms and emoticons. Some used the asterisk to self-correct in a following entry depending on the circumstances and on the person they were talking to.

I have picked up much more slang through this, and increasingly use the French text expressions (MDR for lol etc), I hardly ever self correct, unless I think they won't understand me.

Successful communication was perceived as more important than linguistic accuracy – which also explains occasional switching between languages. Comments revealed that participants were well aware of appropriate language registers. Host parents and teachers – also amongst their lists of NSFBFs – were addressed more formally than friends. This supports Barton and Lee's (2013) claim that "online users know very well how to deploy their linguistic resources in different contexts for different purposes and to different people" (p. 55-6).

The use of informal or formal language depended on particular situations but also on personal preferences. This participant describes her deliberate use of formal language.

I don't try to use any sort of text language, I stick to fully written words and phrases ... I will correct myself with * if I notice I've made a mistake ... if I don't know a word sometimes I will preface it by saying I'm not sure that I'm using the right word

Finally a word on emoticons. Most participants used emoticons in their L2 interaction to the same degree as in their native language. The only exception were the Japanese students who used more emoticons in Japanese than in their native language, because it was perceived as a cultural practice.

Emoticons are a major part of Japanese, especially for young people and i've picked up a lot of different emoticons that i've seen my japanese friends using that I wouldn't have learnt in class.

The presented excerpts indicate that language students use Facebook to communicate with NSFBFs in their L2. Their L2 digital practices seem to be shaped by their personal experiences and preferences of online interactions and adjusted to the L2 context (e.g. language mixing, uptake of L2 conventions, such as emoticon use). This leads to the next question: How do their L2 online experiences relate to their formal language study?

Language learning on Facebook and in the classroom

Participants were very clear about the different functions of Facebook and of the classroom for language learning. The thematic coding of the open-answered questions about language learning on Facebook and in the classroom revealed that Facebook was perceived as good for learning informal language (mentioned 56 times), for having conversations (31) and for the informal setting (10). However, nine participants could not see any value in Facebook for language learning and wrote “nothing”. The classroom setting, on the other hand, was valued for the instruction it provided (25), grammar (35), structure (21), opportunities to speak (20) and real interaction (5). Eight participants reinforced that the classroom gave them “everything”. These responses indicate a perceived disconnect of the two environments. While Facebook provided students with opportunities for language use, embedded in a cultural context, they did not make use of these experiences in the classroom setting.

[Facebook provides] Contact with real native speakers and more about their culture, what they are interested in, the music they listen to, the videos they watch, photos of them travelling around France etc.

It can be good to see other people using it to communicate. I don't think it helps with actually studying for the papers though

The perceived gap between language use for personal purposes as opposed to study seemed also to prevent language students asking their NSFBF for advice or help in their language study. Some said that they might occasionally ask for “proper phrasing”, for an oral test or a presentation but in general they only asked for help when they were “desperate” or “really stuck”.

Implications for language education

Many intermediate and advanced language students are well and truly connected with native speakers – most are personal friends - and they are using their L2 for their online conversations. They are exposed to the language and culture of their area of study, however, they are not able to apply this knowledge in the classroom. To close the gap between the informal and the formal, educators need to start acknowledging and encouraging their students’ out-of-class L2 engagement and implement learning activities that allow learners to draw on their experiences as language users. Here are a few considerations and suggestions:

- Teachers need to recognise that their students have developed preferred interactional styles and that training students in appropriate Facebook-use (Prichard 2013) or in “Facebook-literacy” (Reinhard 2013, np) will be of little value.
- Students should be encouraged to use their NSFBFs as a resource and act with the knowledge that seeking information from a native speaker is not cheating.
- Students have their individual L2 experiences but also their individual views on the value of online communication. It is crucial that educators do not assume that students want to use their Facebook resources (or even Facebook) and consult students about their preferences.
- As trends and digital practices change, teachers need to be prepared to reconsider and reinvent their educational practices.

The integration of informal learning practices into the classroom creates a complex learning environment in which the educator ceases to be the expert and in which the formal ceases to be the ideal. It opens the door for real-life language use and enables teachers to support a more complete language development in their students.

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Please cite as: Alm, A. (2014). The socially networked language learner: implications for tertiary language education. In B. Hegarty, J. McDonald, & S.-K. Loke (Eds.), *Rhetoric and Reality: Critical perspectives on educational technology. Proceedings ascilite Dunedin 2014* (pp. 693-697).

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