

## REVIEW OF RESEARCHING LANGUAGE LEARNER INTERACTIONS ONLINE: FROM SOCIAL MEDIA TO MOOCS

### Researching Language Learner Interactions Online: From Social Media to MOOCs

Edward Dixon and Michael Thomas (Eds.)

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*Researching Language Learner Interactions Online: From Social Media to MOOCs*, edited by Dixon and Thomas, offers a multi-faceted view of the latest developments in technology-enhanced language learning, paying special attention to learner exchanges. The editors claim to have a dual focus, addressing both new empirical research and new research approaches in the field, covering not only pedagogical aspects such as instructional design or learning strategies, but also issues at the institutional level such as teacher training, accreditation, and articulation. A holistic approach to language learning is emphasized throughout the volume, both explicitly (in the introduction and Chapters 1, 3, 8, and 19) and implicitly, which gives this monograph a comprehensive nature.

There is a total of 19 chapters which fall into seven sections: (1) Reconceptualizing Learners, (2) Massive Open Online Courses, (3) Digital Video, (4) Social Networking, (5) Telecollaboration, (6) Communities, and (7) Learning Analytics. The 29 contributors come from different parts of the globe: Asia, Australia, Europe and North America. However, since half of them come from the latter, it gives the volume a special “North American flavor”, providing empirical evidence from university courses in Connecticut, Utah, Pennsylvania, Washington D.C., California, Florida, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Each section is comprised of two to three chapters which combine empirical evidence with theoretical frameworks and proposals.

The introductory chapter provides an overview of the volume and advances one of the main ideas that permeate this collection of chapters: Digitally mediated environments enable some sophisticated linguistic exchanges, which are a worthwhile field of research and advancement, both in formal and informal education. This is followed by Part 1, Reconceptualizing Learners, which reflects on how the role of people learning a language has evolved, becoming more active and blurring the distinction between social and educational uses of technology. In Chapter 2, Milstein introduces the concepts of *pancake people*, *throwaway culture*, and “*en media res practices*” (p. 9) to describe the emerging trends in distance language courses. The author places instructors and educators at a crossroads in which they have to decide whether to embrace a new student-led value of the ephemeral or to try and re-direct these

new practices into more structured, formal learning. Chapter 3, by Chik, is the only contribution that specifically attends to Mobile Assisted Language Learning, reporting on an interesting research project that makes use of Positioning Theory to warn against misguided pedagogy in choosing English language apps for young learners. In this chapter, an appendix with the full list of apps that were examined would have been helpful to the reader in order to gain a fuller picture.

Part 2 focuses on Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which according to the book editors, “are set to have an unprecedented impact on educational practice and affect the ways students engage with language and culture over the next decade” (p. 1). This is confirmed not only by the three chapters that comprise this section, but by the repeated references to this new modality in most of the subsequent sections: Part 3 (Chapter 8), Part 4 (Chapter 11), Part 5 (Chapter 14) and Part 7 (Chapter 19). Chapter 4 relies on Sociality Theory to analyze the interactions in one of the few truly connectivist language MOOCs devised to date. Lewis, Comas-Quinn and Hauck examine data drawn from their MOOC on open translation practices and conclude that the common features associated with human sociality (empathy, altruism, reciprocity, fairness, and collaboration) enhance the performance of participants in the course, both as volunteer translators and as successful learners. In Chapter 5, Rubio compares the course-delivery formats of three types of technology-enhanced courses: blended, online, and MOOC. Looking at interaction patterns and correlations between delivery format and student success, the author concludes that there is no specific format that stands out as overtly better. All three allow instructors and learners to potentially make the most of the language course in different ways. His most prominent contribution is perhaps the useful insight he provides for course designers and instructors. In Chapter 6, Dixon and Fuchs deal with similar issues summoning the need to reconsider digitally mediated courses—such as online courses and MOOCs—and face-to-face instruction in terms of content, objectives, assignments, and assessment. Whereas the proficiency goals may remain the same, it is mainly assessment issues which need to be reconsidered, given that they provide the most stimulating affordances, taking for instance the potential of massive communicative exchanges in MOOCs.

Part 3 turns to the subfield of digital video. Chapter 7, by Marre Karasic and Vedantham, provides a taxonomy of current video creation tools used for language learning and suggests that video assignments enhance the understanding of other languages and cultures, while at the same time they enable students to be more aware of their own identity through this learning process. In Chapter 8, Thomas describes the European Union funded project CAMELOT, which explores the use of machinima in language learning contexts, putting the emphasis on task-based language teaching and project-based learning. In the last chapter of this section, Chapter 9, Akiyama reports the affordances of an eTandem learning project which made use of video-based Skype sessions. These exchanges resulted in increased first language awareness as well as a heightened responsiveness to sociolinguistic variations and discourse options in the foreign language.

Part 4, Social Networking, investigates online social structures. In Chapter 10, Vandergriff focuses on learner agency in forum interactions, showing the different ways in which participants initiate and plan language learning, develop metalinguistic talk, self-regulate their learning, approach the learning content, and even take the role of the instructor in some cases. The authors of Chapter 11, Christensen and Christensen, discuss the efficacy of digitally mediated language learning in a social network site. Looking at the communicative exchanges between Japanese language learners and their native partners, they identify issues of scaffolding that may hinder or enhance these interactions. In Chapter 12, Blattner, Dalola, and Lomicka offer an inspiring study on the effective use of Twitter to make language learners aware of pragmatic issues (the use of abbreviations and borrowings from English in the learning of French as a foreign language) even at beginner levels such as the one described in their study.

Part 5 is devoted to telecollaboration, another keyword that is repeated outside the two chapters included in this section, being explicitly mentioned in Part 2 (Chapter 6), Part 3 (Chapter 9) and Part 4 (Chapter 10). Schenker describes, in Chapter 13, a fundamental issue in language interactions between native and

non-native speakers, negotiation of meaning, and shows that it can successfully take place in virtual environments, even at beginning language levels. Chapter 14, by Messina Dahlberg and Bagga-Gupta provides a different angle on telecollaboration, offering an anthropologically framed study that explores how online language learners create communities through the use of a third space (the virtual classroom) and hybridity (different language varieties, identity positions, etc.) in an environment that is not defined by classroom walls.

These communities are at the center of Part 6. Chapter 15, by Batardiere, explores how higher order thinking skills can be enhanced in asynchronous online discussions, identifying cognitive presence and engagement in online forums. White's Chapter 16 explores the relationship between orientation of learners toward communities of practice and the digital tools that they choose to access those communities, claiming that it is the educator's responsibility to expose students to activities and resources that will make accessing those social groups an easier task. Chapter 17 closes this section with a valuable theoretical contribution. Case delves into the creation of personal learning environments using an activity-theory framework, and shows the vast opportunities that are already in place for language learners to generate and expand their personal learning environments through technology that ranges from vocabulary-training applications to machine translation or foreign language practice via social media.

The closing section, Part 7, Learning Analytics (LA), is a novelty in the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). In Chapter 18, Youngs, Moss-Horwitz, and Snyder describe the application of Educational Data Mining to a French elementary course and make the case for the usefulness of such analysis in detecting possible pitfalls in course design. Although they admit that qualitative studies help clarify assumptions and cross-reference what the data appear to indicate, they demonstrate the main strength of LA these days: "Data analysis can offer a view into student learning and highlight where educators need to step in to guide students, where course designs need to be improved, and where researchers can focus future efforts to improve students' online experiences and learning" (p. 366). In the concluding chapter, Chapter 19, Link and Li retrieve Chapelle's (2001) renowned theoretical proposal for evaluating CALL materials and adapt it for the use of LA in language teaching and learning, putting forward a possible framework to be implemented in CALL research. This re-using and re-purposing corresponds well with the latest trends in education and also falls in line with open educational resources, MOOCs, and other open practices. However, it is yet to be seen whether the framework is adopted and generalized in a field that is still very incipient, since LA alone does not fully account for student behavior and learning needs.

Case, one of the authors in the volume, states that the primary focus of CALICO monographs such as this "has been on technology in institutional contexts" (p. 325) and this is also true of *Researching Language Learner Interactions Online: From Social Media to MOOCs*. However, this book clearly goes beyond the boundaries of brick-and-mortar classrooms and emphasizes the increasing importance of informal learning settings, which is, in my opinion, one of its main strengths. The breadth and depth of topics is equally valuable, as well as how it accounts for empirical evidence while providing worthy theoretical underpinnings: Positioning Theory, Sociality Theory, Socio-cultural Theory, and Activity Theory. Readers of this volume will not be short of theoretical frameworks on which to base their future research. All topics are treated from theoretical and practical perspectives in a comprehensive manner, but it would have been desirable to see some cross-references between the individual chapters, or otherwise have a concluding chapter, which would draw the seven parts together and give an overview of what the book has achieved. In terms of format, another nice addition would be a title page for each of the sections, so that the different parts of the book are clearly separated. Nevertheless, paraphrasing a statement by one of the contributing authors (Milstein), here substance reigns over style and the amount of *substance* is praiseworthy: an overview of relevant conceptualizations in current foreign language research, coverage of a wide spectrum of languages and language levels, a focus on socio-cultural as well as linguistic aspects, reflections on the importance of metacognition and self-directed learning, and coverage of

complex issues such as the development of LA for language research in a way that is accessible and not overly technical. The assets of this volume are manifold. It is well worth considering for language teachers and researchers, as well as for undergraduate and postgraduate students interested in current trends in CALL.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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