

Chapter 4.6

Social Networking Sites and Critical Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at the potential use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) for educators and second language learners. It views SNSs broadly through the lens of Critical Language Learning (CLL) and looks at specific issues of identity formation, student empowerment, learner autonomy, and critical literacy as they relate to the use of SNSs. This chapter also reports the results of an initial project to make use of the MySpace social networking site for Japanese learners of English. It is hoped that this chapter will raise awareness of some of the complex issues surrounding the use of SNSs by language learners and that it will lead to further research and consideration of these issues.

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INTRODUCTION

As technological innovations of all kinds push our society forward at ever increasing speeds, the basic nature of social interaction is being transformed. Social networks are now being formed in ways that no one would have imagined 50 years ago. Currently at the heart of this phenomenon is the massive rise in popularity of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) like MySpace, Mixi, Facebook and others; sites designed specifically for the purpose of developing and sustaining interconnectivity amongst users. Though English may currently be the language favored by the majority of users of SNSs, it certainly does not have a monopoly on this trend. The SNS Mixi, for example, which functions exclusively in Japanese, currently has over 11 million registered users. Indeed, accord-

ing to recent global trends in blog posting, the Japanese language has actually surpassed English in regards to the number of blog posts per language, with Japanese now generating 37% of the total contribution to the blogosphere (Sertan, 2007; Sifry, 2007). The global ubiquity of SNSs means that second language learners can easily find themselves in contact with native speakers anywhere in the world. Clearly the popularity of the sites, combined with the opportunities for meaningful interaction that they present, potentially make them a powerful platform for second language acquisition, and, in fact, research into how best to take advantage of this opportunity is beginning (Godwin-Jones, 2006; O'Hanlon, 2007; Murray, 2005).

There are complex questions to be considered however; questions that relate specifically to changes in the meaning of identity and the forms of social interaction that occur online. How, for example, can the complexities of second language identity formation be interwoven into one's online identity formation? Or, what new types of literacies are required for decoding and interpreting information in multi-modal, peer to peer environments like SNSs? (Dieu, Campbell, & Ammann, 2006). Could we also consider an analysis from a constructivist perspective? Social constructivism, particularly as it relates to education, places primary importance on the need for mediation and social interaction in the development of meaning (Pasfield-Neofitou, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). Web 2.0 technologies are, after all, primarily about the construction of meaning through interaction between and amongst users. Some research recently has looked to constructivism and in particular Vygotskian social constructivism as a way to interpret and assess some of the potential benefits of the type of peer editing and collaboration that can take place on wikis and SNSs (Lavin & Claro, 2005). This chapter will attempt to lay a framework for a discussion of these questions and others by looking at SNSs and other associated Web 2.0 technologies from a Critical Language

Learning (CLL) perspective and by considering a recent case study looking specifically at the use of the MySpace SNS to facilitate the acquisition of English amongst Japanese university students. Specifically, this case study had three primary objectives:

1. To assess Japanese students' interest level and motivation regarding the use of SNSs to improve their English skills.
2. To consider the use of the MySpace SNS through the framework of the issues of identity formation, learner autonomy, critical literacy, and student empowerment (Pennycook, 1997).
3. To map out potential difficulties and opportunities for further research into the potential use of SNSs for English learners in Japan.

This case study and its associated research relating to CLL and the potential applications for SNSs in the second language classroom is one of the first of its kind, particularly in a specifically Japanese context. It is hoped, however, that this chapter will lead to further discussions and considerations of the relationship between the changing nature of social interaction in the age of the Internet, and the potential opportunities and challenges that these changes present to the second language learner.

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND CALL

Social networking itself is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, our innate need for social interaction has always drawn people together to form real-world social networks where members sought to build and maintain a sense of community through interconnectedness with others. Though CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) has existed in various forms for most of the last 50 years, it is only recently, as the Internet has begun to work its

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