

Chapter 93

Learning Languages in Cyberspace

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ABSTRACT

A great deal of formal and informal language learning and teaching is taking place in cyberspace. A number of theoretically motivated affordances for online language learning point to why this is the case. In the last decade, these affordances have been identified and empirically examined in a number of studies. This entry synthesizes the extant research on these online language education activities and the state of current understanding regarding the potential of teaching and learning languages in cyberspace.

INTRODUCTION

Since the first building-size computers were accessible to language educators, computing power has been harnessed in the service of teaching world languages. The capacity to amass and manipulate target language texts and shape these into interactive routines and sequences for language learners brought a new dimension to the field of language education and gave rise to the subfield, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). This field has been active in design, development and re-

search that seek to understand effective teaching and learning with technologies.

Most recently the advent of online telecommunications in cyberspace has sparked CALL developers and practitioners to integrate this powerful form of teaching and learning into language education. It has moreover spurred researchers to undertake inquiry into the ways in which specific instructional practices support and augment language teaching and learning. Likewise, independent or ‘autonomous language learners’ have historically made use of whatever means at hand to practice and hone the languages they wished to learn. It is not surprising, then, to

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find both language educators and independent language learners around the globe making highly productive use of contemporary social media technologies.

Theory and research in applied linguistics and second language acquisition generally, and CALL in particular, align cleanly with the kinds of communicative activity afforded by contemporary internet social connectivity. We know, for example, that while learning an additional language involves complex and multifaceted processes, for most learners these processes are most effective when they entail active comprehension and production of the target language for authentic communicative purposes (Block, 2003; Ellis, 2003; Lightblown & Spada, 2003; Lyster, 2007; Meskill & Anthony, 2007). This fact alone renders social media in cyberspace particularly well suited as a language learning venue. For both formal instruction and informal learning there are multiple affordances attendant to communicating with others while accessing linguistic and cultural resources and these are increasingly being used to support language development. From simple email, chat and newsgroups to more elaborate social media, gaming and knowledge building internet sites, educators and their students have been active users as part of their efforts to teach and learn new languages. Both asynchronous communication formats and synchronous have been employed to provide language learners with opportunities to learn and actively practice the languages they study. Consequently, since its inception and earliest appropriations by world languages education, a number of language and technology theorists have delineated specific affordances inherent in online social media tools and venues that render the medium a powerful one for language teaching and learning. Some of these prominent affordances are:

Ortega (1997):

- Equalizer of participation structures
- Increase in learner output and learner productivity
- Quality of linguistic production

Warschauer (1999):

- Students achieve more written fluency through greater practice of computer-based writing;
- Students benefit from focusing on linguistic structures that written communication provides;
- Students are provided opportunities for expression and reflection

Khalsa et al (2007):

- Authenticity
- Voice
- Equal learning opportunities
- Individual attention
- Freedom of expression
- Convenience and accessibility
- Engagement
- Collaboration
- Technological literacy.

In the context of simulated environments such as MOOs, virtual 3-D worlds, and online games, additional affordances have been suggested.

Sykes, Oskoz & Thorne (2008):

- Simulated identities allow experimentation with, and practice in pragmatic language functions in diverse social contexts and settings
- Students can engage in meaningful language practice in low-risk, face preserving contexts

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