

Learners' agency in a Facebook-mediated community

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Abstract. Agency, defined by Gao (2013) as learners' "dynamic strategic behavior" (p. 29) in response to contextual realities, has been central to educational undertakings. While the affordances of social networking sites like Facebook have been extensively examined in a number of educational studies, there has been a scarcity of research on critically appraising language learners' agency in the Facebook community. By exploring learners' agency, this study aims to unveil language learners' self-regulation, autonomous action, and decision-making. Five Taiwanese third-year English majors were recruited as case subjects for the qualitative inquiry. They participated in an extracurricular project for vocabulary learning in Facebook. Data triangulation comprised a set of pre- and post-vocabulary tests to investigate their progress in acquiring academic words, an open-ended questionnaire for their perceptions of the online learning experience, and the data of their postings and interactions in this Facebook community. Results from the in-depth interview reveal that learner agency in vocabulary learning via Facebook depends on their strategically selecting (1) academic words to post, (2) Google images to illustrate the referred words, and (3) online dictionary definitions. In addition, interactiveness and responsiveness among the Facebook community members support the creation of an "affinity space" (Gee, 2003) for the learners that stimulates a critical awareness of their self-regulation and learner autonomy. The pedagogical implication is that the Facebook-mediated community can enhance the interactive learning activity.

Keywords: Facebook, learner agency, learning community.

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1. Introduction

Social media provide the users with synchronous applications to enhance multilateral interaction, facilitate community-building and make meaning through multi-modal content. With the surge in Web 2.0 applications over the recent years, each virtual platform boosts a wide range of attributes such as distinct user agency, reciprocal interactivity, collaborative participation, or polyfocal attention structure (Ang & Zaphiris, 2005; Golonka et al., 2014; Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Wesch, 2007).

Facebook, among all the contending social networking sites, has established itself as the most distributed platform, where visual/textual presentations, aural/verbal communications and synchronous/asynchronous interactions all become reality. Research related to language education through the medium of Facebook has thus proliferated globe-wide (see, e.g. Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Çoklar, 2012; Jones & Hafner, 2012; Wu, Marek, & Huang, 2012). Nevertheless, there has been scarcity of research on critically appraising language learners' agency in the Facebook community.

Agency, defined by Warschauer (2005), is “the power to take meaningful action and see the results of one's decisions and choices” (p. 45). Taking the contextual and structural realities into account, Gao (2013) further contends that agency refers to learners' strategic behaviors in coping with the world and entails each individual's “self-consciousness, reflexivity, intentionality, cognition, and emotionality” (p. 227). Drawing on the concepts of learner agency and aiming to unveil language learners' self-regulation, autonomous action, and decision-making, this research focused on five third-year undergraduates who voluntarily participated in an extracurricular vocabulary learning project on Facebook.

All of these five participants, three males and two females, were English majors. One male participant was Japanese whereas the rest were all Taiwanese. Within this project that lasted for three weeks, each participant was required to accomplish their own learning task by joining a Facebook community and serving dual roles in their own community: as a teacher to select and post vocabulary words along with their corresponding images and definitions for other participants and also as a learner to respond to others' postings. Each Facebook community consisted of five members in conjunction with five weekdays when each member was expected to post at least one academic word a day. Two of the female participants were partners to each other within the same community while each of the male participants participated in three different communities.

2. Method

This qualitative study was conducted in an attempt to explore learners’ agency within three weeks of online vocabulary learning in a Facebook community. Data triangulation comprised a set of pre- and post- vocabulary tests to trace their progress in acquiring academic words, an open-ended questionnaire for their perceptions of this online learning experience, and the artifacts inclusive of their postings and interactions in this Facebook community.

Upon completion of this project, a semi-structured interview was also conducted as the primary research instrument. This entire spectrum of data was collected and verified against each other to assure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990) of the study. The researchers adopted content analysis (Patton, 1990) and constant comparative methods to analyze and present the findings grounded in the data and to “elaborate on emergent themes and consider theoretical implications” (Duff, 2008, p. 55).

The semi-structured interview protocol, classified into two major domains, is shown below.

Table 1. Topic domain I: vocabulary learning process

Lead-off Question		Follow-up Questions	
1.	How did you decide a word in the list to post?	1.	Out of personal interest? Personal amount of need? Easier accessibility? Recent learning encounter?
2.	How and how much time did you find information to write for the chosen word?	2.	How to find the chosen word, the image and the sentence?
3.	How and what did you expect from your vocabulary learning efforts?	3.	What has been acquired? In what way have you acquired them?
4.	Did you have any special experience during this learning process?	4.	Any new cognition about learning a language? Any particular affective episode during the process?

Table 2. Topic domain II: social presence

Lead-off Question		Follow-up Questions	
1.	How relevant is online social constructivist learning to your vocabulary practices in the SDVL project?	1.	Why do you believe so?
2.	Does on-line social constructivist learning stimulate your reflective thinking?	2.	Any other constructivist learning experience?
3.	To what extent do you engage in interactive sharing and responding?	3.	The extent of engagement in other FB groups?
4.	Does the peers’ responding support you to post more words?	4.	If so, are you motivated to read peer-directed vocabulary? If not, how do you evaluate their online responding?

3. Results and discussion

The results derived from the in-depth semi-structured interview revealed that, to acquire academic vocabulary via the Facebook community, the participants adopted various strategies in selecting (1) academic words to post, (2) Google images to illustrate the referred words, and (3) online dictionary definitions to explain to other members. Behind these strategic behaviors was the fundamental finding that successful vocabulary acquisition relied heavily on the initiative of the learner per se and the learner's own reflexivity, intentionality and emotionality. Before they embarked on learning, they had been conscious of their own weaknesses or preferences, thereby determining to employ an optimal strategy to learn.

In addition, peer-to-peer interactiveness and consistent responsiveness among the Facebook community members proved prophetic to the success of an online learning community. Each community formed an "affinity space" (Gee, 2003; cited by Jones & Hafner, 2012, p. 71) to meet a shared common goal: vocabulary learning, and that stimulated a critical awareness of their own self-regulation and learner autonomy among the participants. The posting and responding regularly recurred, afterwards facilitating the learners' cognitive perception and retention of each newly-acquired word. Pedagogically, the implication of this study was that the Facebook-mediated community did enhance distinct learner agency as well as e-learning interactivity.

4. Conclusions

The encompassing goal of this study was to examine learners' agency as it emerged through his/her social presence in a Facebook community. The roadmap for the future integration of Facebook into students' learning is forthright. On the macro level, while using the Facebook community as a learning medium, the learning partners within the same community are advised to transcend beyond acquaintance level so that meaningful action can be taken and reciprocal collaboration can be ensured (Warschauer, 2005). This is also reiterated by Jones and Hafner (2012), "[s]uccessful communication depends not only on common shared understanding of the culture of the affinity space, but also on more general awareness of the kinds of cultural assumptions that people from diverse backgrounds might bring to the interaction" (p. 115). At the micro level, then, all participants exert a more empowering agency by playing a constructive role as a teacher in his or her community. Instead of being a passive recipient of academic vocabulary, they enjoy taking the initiative for their own learning. Accordingly, as technologies continue to evolve, learners should be given responsibility to maintain their agency.

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