iTESOL: Analogous practices in the SLA classroom

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Recent studies of emerging technologies have shown that mobile phone production now exceeds one billion devices globally per year (Johnson, Levine, & Smith, 2008). With a level of production that signifies a shift in the ownership of networked machines from institutions to individuals, the broad appeal of portable technologies now offers individuals access and control over a growing range of electronic resources. This paper explores resource sharing and collaborative communications practices in the spaces of the second language acquisition (SLA) classroom. From informal conversations with students and the writer's observations, the paper discusses the processes of language acquisition that can emerge through portable technologies such as handheld translators, smart phones, portable computers, and so on. It considers how these kinds of technologies orchestrate and influence student classroom interactions and experiences. In particular, the writing examines social learning in the SLA classroom, and how what is often subtle dialogue between digital/electronic technologies and classroom learners can provide enduring creative frameworks for language acquisition in the contemporary world.

Keywords: *portable technologies; second language acquisition; social learning*

Introduction

This paper attempts to engage with contemporary approaches to SLA (Nunan, 1999) by observing learners in an SLA teaching environment where there is a prevalence of digital dictionaries, mobile translators and smart phones. An assumption in this paper is that electronic devices cooperate with established classroom practices to assist learners through the process of acquiring another language, and that these devices contribute to a lively learning space where a learner's first language (L1) collides productively with their second (L2) to further acquisition skills. This speculation challenges the more dominant view that electronic

devices offer ready access to vocabulary and grammar "correction". Rather, it suggests that a reciprocal process between new digital technologies and SLA contributes to contemporary learning approaches, which include negotiating multiple styles of learning and learners exercising their own choices and needs in the hope of engaging with learner-centred instruction (Nunan, 1999, pp. 148-170). For this paper, a "second language" will mean the English language as it is used in Australia.

Questions of literacy

Sharpening the lens of language acquisition approaches literacy where it is lived: in our bodies and with others (Fuller, 2005). According to one writer, the same can be said about digital technologies in the way that they accommodate the variable nature of our lives and the cultures we create and inhabit. New social circumstances have emerged out of established practices and offer revised bases for ongoing cultural change, which now incorporates new digital technologies (Radok, 2009). Continual change in this area has challenged the notion of what constitutes literacy; such that the established view of literacy as "the ability to read and write a language" (Nunan, 1999, p. 310) has been irrevocably tested. Thus, what were once considered singular textual forms, such as print, visual, or spoken texts, are now multimodal and offer revised directions for classroom practice (Carrington & Robinson, 2009).

Recent writing in the area of digital technologies and young people, for example, has explored emerging relations between literacy and text, deciding that the utility of learning texts can no longer be distinguished from the "technologies of pleasure… available in our digital cultures" (Carrington & Robinson, 2009, p. 3). Focused on the attainment of meaning, this research argues that

> [m]ultimodal texts are neither print nor entirely digital… It is time our classrooms became places where digital and print literacies come together to allow… opportunities to develop the skills and attitudes [learners] will need to navigate complex urban sites and social forms. (Carrington & Robinson, 2009, p. 3)

While there is evidence of the combination of print and digital in tertiary education (lectures delivered in person and as podcasts and vodcasts, discussion forums and weblogs used as assessment components, etc.), an era of similar promise in "digital

TESOL" seems still to be established, despite the publication of potentially useful texts in this area (see Dudeney & Hockly, 2007). Thus bringing SLA teaching texts into line with a parallel pedagogy, or a pedagogy where print and other textual modes are complementary (Leander, as cited in Carrington & Robinson, 2009, p. 149), is a practice worth exploring.

SLA curricula for academic purposes can be heavily biased towards printed texts that emphasise the macro-skills of reading and writing. This may be because of a similarly solid emphasis on reading and writing in the academy, an emphasis on what could be described as the "effect of context on strings of linguistic events" (Brown, 2007, p. 232). It can be said that academic English is a product of a particular environment, and tends to engender a series of "acquisition discourses" in its maintenance (Nunan, 1999, p. 40). The term "parallel pedagogy" arrives at the door of the SLA classroom, however, at a time that is surely expectant of change. This term outlines how "old and new literacy practices, including print texts and visual texts, may be fruitfully taught side by side, rather than the 'old' being a precursor to the 'new' or being replaced by it" (Leander, as cited in Carrington & Robinson, 2009, p. 149). What is required now is a simultaneous pedagogy that understands the equally simultaneous nature of generative and meaningful processes of communication encouraged by the presence of digital technologies in contemporary daily lives (Carrington, 2007).

Inductive learning with digital texts
At the level of L1 engagement, then, it can be said that students bring densely layered social and textual literacies into the SLA environment, and that these can encourage explorative learning contexts in a second language (Nunan, 1999). To illustrate this claim, it is often the case in a lesson that a word or phrase is queried in an assigned exercise or task by a student. Rather than provide a response answer, a strategy suggested is that students use translation devices, either L1 to L2 (English to Chinese, for example), or L2 to L2 (English to English), to explore, test or compare the different results. This has the outcome of creating new texts as results are shared, debated, further queried and explored, and becomes part of a process of a wider, yet selective, dissemination of the original query.

David Nunan (1999, p. 139) has argued that where learners are "given access to data and are provided with structured opportunities to work out rules, principles, and applications for themselves," new knowledge can be "deeply processed" as learners work things out for themselves. This is seen as part of a repertoire of inductive "organic approaches" (Nunan, 1999, p. 137) to language acquisition that have positive and meaningful effects for L2 learners.

While it can be said that these kinds of exchanges are not specific to the use of digital technologies, and that resources such as books and paper dictionaries could achieve similar results, the difference is in the immediacy with which different forms of a word or term are accessed. Such immediacy underlines how directly this access creates unexpected directions in teaching and learning. Electronic translation dictionaries, for example, often include spoken text. These devices can contribute to further discussions about pronunciation or generate surprising classroom events which may revolve around humour as students mispronounce or invent inexplicable terms, or produce what could be called "productive misunderstandings", should a word or term be unfamiliar. At these times, students can exercise choices in their negotiation of new understandings, rejecting or incorporating the rules and principles of language as they emerge (Nunan, 1999, pp. 137-138). Negotiations of language emerge alongside the electronic devices, giving space to explore words and meanings with other students, and opening the possibility for creating authentic encounters.

The concept of immediacy

"Immediacy", in the context of the digital era, is a term associated with the sense of immersion into "virtual reality" environments, or environments where one's engagements are characterised by seamlessness; by the disappearance of an apparatus or physical boundary between self and machine. At these times, a new sense of what is real can emerge and offer perceptive shifts in experience and understanding (Manovich, 2001). Immediacy is a term whose efficacy is widely debated in communications and media scholarship and carries historical references into its contemporary understandings. These references do not limit it to encounters with digital technologies, but suggest broader philosophical and cultural bases (Massumi, 2002).

For the purposes of this paper, immediacy offers a workable framework for looking at the pedagogical implications of new technologies in the classroom. Here, the meaning of the term should be distinguished from the notion of "immersion" as it applies to immersion programs, or programs that advocate instruction almost solely in a learner's target language (Nunan, 1999, p. 45). Immediacy, in this case, refers to interactive acquisition; where the turn to digital technologies is automatic and the distinction between instruction and acquisition are unclear, it is often difficult to locate the exact nature or moment of SLA (Nunan, 1999, p. 47). It is also the case that the interrelationship between learning and acquisition seems unresolved, with a distinction drawn in earlier research between learning as conscious and acquisition as unconscious. In line with Krashen (1982), Nunan (1999, p. 43) describes this distinction as one where the processes of learning and acquisition are totally discrete, with "[c]onscious learning focusing on grammatical rules, enabling the learner to memorize rules and to identify instances of rule violation and subconscious acquisition facilitating the acquisition of rules at a subconscious level".

Krashen's distinction held that "learning could not become acquisition" (Nunan, 1999, p. 44), yet a contemporary focus on learners as active in the learning process troubles what we see here as the influence of empirical reason in pedagogical understandings. It is this kind of troubling which demonstrates how imprecise the logics of learning and acquisition actually are; logics which now orchestrate effective learning in new SLA classrooms. An example to illustrate this point can be seen as follows: the class opens with students bringing portable computers into the room to conduct essay conferencing, a discussion that centres on the progress of their work for a given research and writing task. Student A calls the teacher to her desk and opens her laptop, showing the draft of her essay. Discussion takes place about the essay's various components, with frequent pauses to edit at sentence level. The student responds to a marking correction code in this process, and the teacher enters elements of the code into the student's paper via the keyboard. Part way through, Student B listens in because the discussion is relevant to his progress. Student B glances at Student A's writing and comments on the detail of a paragraph, alerting her to a grammatical error. Someone else's mobile phone vibrates nearby and almost all students glance at its owner, then at the teacher, laugh nervously and await the outcome. The student with

the phone apologises and leaves the classroom, presumably to take a call. The teacher shrugs her shoulders and they continue.

In another part of the room, Student C takes a photograph from a resource which has been distributed for in-class use. He uses a mobile phone to do this, transfers the image into his computer through Bluetooth File Exchange, and tells his peers he will distribute the photo to them later via email. The teacher has the same detail displayed on the LCD monitor at the front of the classroom, near which two students stand and evaluate the content. The teacher moves to a discussion with another student about the student's essay. The student also has a synonym that she is unsure of displayed on her electronic dictionary. The teacher takes the dictionary and tries another word. The possibilities and meanings of the word are discussed. These moments are repeated in various ways throughout the session, and seem to characterise many teaching sessions.

Instant access is inherently a part of students' approaches to progressing a particular task. In their exchanges with the teacher and with each other, digital technologies weave the learning and social aspects of the lesson into contexts for possible acquisition. If, as Anna Chamot (2001, pp. 41-42) has suggested, learning a language is not a speedy process, but involves the nuances of one's specific "cultural, linguistic and educational background", then these technologies have introduced a new element into the contributions learners themselves make to the learning process. With digital technologies in the classroom, speed matters, and is integral to a sense of participation. A "let me see, too, and let me see now" environment is favoured over working individually but at the same time, the engagements can often be slow and considered, tending towards strategies of authenticity where students make sense of what they learn through meaningful interaction with others (Nunan, 1999, p. 212).

Are these interactions moments of elicitation that are based on the parallel pedagogies mentioned above, where digital technologies contribute to existing frameworks as well as introduce distinct elements into the authentication process (Leander, 2009; Nunan, 1999)? The limits of such a speculation are obvious with specific work about the digital, inside an SLA framework, being difficult to locate. Perhaps it is the case that, if nothing else, these technologies echo the best intentions of teachers attempting to break the monotony of language tasks, and students hoping for engagement (Dornyei, 2001). The sense is, however, that many

teachers are themselves in need of digital literacies development in ways that revise, rather than counter, established teaching methods (Carrington, 2007).

Yet, even at the level of novelty, these devices support a range of linguistic extensions, as the examples above illustrate. Dornyei (2001, pp. 75-76) shows that the introduction of novelty contributes positively to a learning process as a motivational strategy. According to this line of thought, the more interesting motivational strategies modify tasks to introduce a number of stimulating features into otherwise routine classroom practices. These include strategies of challenge, interesting content, the novelty element, the intriguing element, the exotic element, the fantasy element and the personal element (Dornyei, 2001). As I have mentioned above, and from recent observations, "speed" could be added to this list as a strategy brought from the everyday, from the multitude of experiences we are familiar with when using digital systems. It is possible that, in this way, the learning environment can also be personalised. As the classroom examples show, a personalised learning environment is one where "sharing your own opinions and ideas" introduces "a learner-centred dimension by getting learners involved in the process underlying their learning and in making active contributions to the learning" (Nunan, 1999, p. 321; p. 211).

New SLA practices
In taking multiple literacies seriously as educators, we need to confront and integrate the digital proficiencies of learners in the classroom. In the context of SLA, it is these proficiencies that introduce an element of risk and reflexivity into SLA classroom practice, challenging teachers to examine diverse, perhaps miscellaneous, negotiations of language. Even though the English language currently dominates popular forms of social or networked media (Lovink, 2008), the locus of literacies control can still be within the grasp of an L2 learner, especially as social media invite user-led, and limited, participation. It is interesting to note that, in the case of weblogs, for example, estimates suggest that the number of predominantly English language blogs exceeds 110 million, and a figure around 70 million has been put forward for blogs emerging directly from China (Helmond, 2008). Here, we can ask what the landscape of digital social networks might look like in a few short years should China's influence extend into the broader digital milieu. If it does, what bearing might that have on

English language instruction and negotiation in Australia, and its place in regional relations in the Asia-Pacific?

Brown (2007, p. 276) has noted a movement from language form to "functional language within communicative contexts" as influential on recent pedagogy in language instruction. This shift has led to what is known as "form-focused instruction (FFI)", and, following Spada (1997), is defined as "any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners' attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly" (as cited in Brown, 2003, p. 276). This drawing attention to form is an act of making strange language conventions noticeable, and, in practice, asking learners to re-encounter language as it influences them.

Moving this thought into a classroom environment where digital proficiencies are often already at hand offers a framework for enabling the emergence of new linguistic forms, and engages educators in an understanding of learning as forum based. This suggests that teaching and learning is a space of multiple and intersecting dialogues, not only a space for what is instructional or receptive. It is the context of the form that directs relative outcomes for a particular student, and perhaps signals the future of language teaching, where complex social and cultural relations constitute learning for a given situation. This kind of focus textualises digital technologies broadly because it

> involves examining what people do with texts … [and] means investigating the values, priorities, purposes and feelings associated with these texts, and the places, spaces, relationships, interactions and processes which characterize their use. In effect, looking at digital experience as practice may provide insights into the discourses that frame this experience in different domains. (Burnett, 2009, p. 116)

It is possible that such a nuanced engagement with digital technologies inspires the cultural literacies so crucial to teaching and learning because "meaningful participation [is] increasingly likely to pivot around consuming [digital] technologies and producing texts and social practices using them" (Carrington, 2007, p. 103). Thus it is feasible to argue that contemporary SLA approaches should accommodate the broadest possible sweep of classroom practices. Digital technologies can enable participatory sensibilities and practices in SLA classrooms, and, it would seem that specific research into the advantages, disadvantages and moments in between those is long overdue.

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