# Social media in the L2 classroom: Everyday agency, awareness, and autonomy

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## Introduction

While traditional modern foreign language educational practice has traditionally relegated everyday language to beginning levels, upholding prestige varieties, academic writing, and rarified literary practices for more advanced study, modern standards and guidelines promote proficiencies in vernacular domains that modern L2 (second and foreign language) learners arguably need to survive. That fact is especially true if they wish to actually use the languages they study for everyday purposes. Recognizing this, some L2 instructors have noted the potential of social media—including blogs, wikis, social networking sites, and dozens of similar sites, services, and apps—to complement focus on the academic and engage learners in everyday, vernacular domains. They hypothesize that because social media are popular and familiar, learners will more easily authenticate and accept their use for formal L2 learning activities. Moreover, the vernacular, everyday nature of social media might afford learners access to discourses in the L2 that are normally unrecognized and difficult to replicate in formal instruction.

By 2018, social media will be part of the everyday lives of nearly a third of all humans, all over the planet (Statista, 2016). Increasing access to new technologies and broadband have brought about unprecedented levels of sharing and remixing of digital media, as aspects of production and distribution of media are given over to individual, yet socially collectivized users. Literacy scholars (e.g. Lankshear and Knobel, 2006) argue these new practices lead to new types and forms of literacies and new dispositions towards authorship, expertise, and identity. Unlike traditional academic literacies, however, new digital literacies are learned mostly experientially and are normed not to officially sanctioned standards but to particular ecologies and "cultures-of-use"

(Thorne, 2003) that are emergent, dynamic, and relational. This presents challenges for educators who wish to develop and leverage social media literacies for formal language learning purposes.

In response to these challenges, in this chapter I propose that to leverage the potentials of social media for effective and autonomous L2 learning, pedagogy should take a literacies-focused approach that balances provision of learner agency with the tools needed to develop awareness. To situate this proposal, I first present a summary of research on social media for second and foreign language teaching and learning (L2TL) based on surveys of the field (Reinhardt, 2017; Reinhardt, in press), with a particular focus on agency, awareness, and autonomy. I then outline a literacies approach to social media-enhanced L2 pedagogy as an approach that may be up to the challenge.

## A summary of research on social media in L2 teaching and learning

From the mid-2000's to the present, the topic of social media has become a substantial part of conferences in CALL (computer-assisted language learning) and L2 teaching and learning (L2TL) and has been discussed in hundreds of journal pieces and several notable edited volumes (Thomas, 2009; Lomicka and Lord, 2009; Lamy and Zourou, 2013; and Dixon and Thomas, 2015). Current L2TL research on social media is informed by foundational research in the fields of computer-mediated communication and educational technology and is grounded in social constructivist CALL research begun in the 1990s on use of synchronous (chat) and asynchronous (discussion boards and email) tools for L2TL and cultural exchange (e.g. Warschauer & Kern, 2000). When Web 2.0 technologies began putting the means of Web-based media production into the hands of average users and became known as "social media" in the 2000s, the contemporaneous "social turn" in SLA (Block, 2003) provided theoretical grounding and methodological tools with which to investigate L2 learning in them.

Most recently, ecological (Blin, 2016) and relational (Kern, 2014) heuristics have begun to supersede technological and social constructivist frameworks for analysis of social media-enhanced L2TL, recognizing the dynamic complexity of how affordances for use emerge from the multiplex relationships among users, purposes, and contexts. Methodologically, most research has used commensurate approaches that are less experimental and generalizable and

more descriptive, phenomenological, and ecologically valid. Although there has been some innovative research on newer social media like *Instagram* or voice blogging, most research—enough to synthesize and identify trends—has been on blogs, wikis, and social networking, which includes microblogging with *Twitter* and social network-enhanced commercial CALL sites and services (SNECSs) like *Busuu* or the now-defunct *Livemocha*.

Definitions of social media are not entirely agreed upon, as different social media technologies increasingly integrate, and are integrated with, other technologies. In brief, social media can be any digital application or technology through which users participate in, create, and share media resources and practices with other users by means of networks that are often user-defined. Since they are Internet-based, they are accessible on a variety of stationary and mobile platforms. In short, blogs emphasize composition with an audience, and highlight individual authorship, while wikis promote collaborative authorship and revision, deemphasizing individual authorship. Social networking sites (SNSs) highlight individual profile creation and the traversing of user-defined networks, offering spaces for the sharing of opinion and identity presentation. SNECSs combine tutorial CALL with social networking mechanics, leveraging the crowd-sourced potential of motivated users to serve as each other's instructors.

## Blogs

Blogs were arguably the first social media, as they were designed to support interactive readership, multimedia embedding, and hyperlinking from their inception in the 1990s. Recognizing the potential of blogs for L2TL, researchers have shown that blogs created and maintained by language learners can afford the development of literacies and identities, intercultural competence, learner autonomy, and audience awareness (Reinhardt, in press). They offer space for reflective and extensive writing with the opportunity to network with other readers and writers, creating a community centered on shared affinities and affording development of identity (Sun & Chang, 2012). Writing online can afford empowerment and language development for non-mainstream students—for example heritage and ESL students—that traditional composition does not (Bloch, 2007). Blogs can also serve as spaces for writers to observe and reflect on the development of their own linguistic and intercultural competence. They serve well as telecollaborative and study abroad spaces for reflection and discussion about observed and experienced

cultural practices (Lee, 2009; 2012). Innovative project and discovery-based task designs connecting learners at home and abroad, cultural informants, and local perspectives afford the conditions for learning culture.

Implications are that development of authorial identity and intercultural awareness is afforded by the real or even merely implied audience in blogs, as learners realize their writing might be read not just by the teacher or classmates, but by a much wider audience. On the other hand, if audience is overemphasized the pressure to show and develop expertise or to be grammatically accurate can overwhelm some students (Vurdien, 2013). Moreover, restricting choice of topic, using blogs as homework repositories, or forcing peer feedback may stifle the affordances of blogs for developing learner autonomy, as learners feel they have no agency, or that the tool is wrong for the task (Chen, Shih, & Liu, 2015). A major learning affordance of blogs, like other social media, is the development of learner autonomy, although it depends on the extent to which formal tasks and other contextual variables complement, rather than conflict with, blog affordances (Lin, Groom, & Lin, 2013). In brief, autonomy is promoted when learners have some control over what they write about and when tasks are authentically similar to vernacular blog activities.

## Wikis

While most are familiar with *Wikipedia*, there are hundreds of smaller wikis created and utilized by affinity communities like gamers, travelers, and other groups. These may offer models for how groups of language learners might build or contribute their own wiki resources and practice collaborative knowledge building in or about the language and culture of study. Wiki research focuses on the tool's affordances for collaborative authorship and revision, developing audience awareness, and acting as a virtual learning environment. While wikis offer affordances for collaborative authorship, some studies have found that learners are wary of focusing on accuracy in wikis (Kessler, 2009)—correcting peer's contributions for grammar—and prefer to focus on textual structure and coherence. Others have found true group collaboration, as opposed to cooperative division of labor, rare and difficult to promote in formal tasks (Arnold, Ducate, & Kost, 2012). Implications are that perhaps even more than blogs, wikis offer affordances for the development of audience awareness (Mak & Coniam, 2008), especially if students contribute to publicly accessible resources like *Wikipedia* (King,

2015). Wiki-enhanced learning tasks should promote sustained interaction, even workload distribution, and mutual respect of opinion, and although teacher guidance might be necessary for focus on accuracy, teacher presence may negatively affect collaboration, especially if learners are working for individual grades. On the other hand, because students may be unfamiliar with wiki technology, they may not use them at all without teacher guidance (Kennedy & Miceli, 2013).

## Social networking

Research on social networking can be categorized by its focus on 1) description of informal use by L2 learners and users of vernacular social networking sites (SNS) like *Facebook*, 2) vernacular SNS-enhanced L2 instruction, 3) *Twitter*-enhanced L2 use and instruction, and 4) social network-enhanced CALL sites (SNECS) like *Livemocha*, *Busuu*, and *Duolingo*. In descriptive studies, vernacular SNSs like *Facebook* have been recognized as offering affordances for connecting to the languages and culture of study and of home (Lee, 2006), for identity expression and literacy development (DePew, 2011), for socialization into real and imagined communities (Chen, 2013), and for self-directed learning and socialization (Pasfield-Neofitou, 2015). L2 learners use SNSs like *Facebook* not only to maintain connections with friends and family at home (Mitchell, 2012), but to develop and present newly conceptualized identities and perspectives to audiences transculturally, in informal, hybrid, polylingual and multimodal ways (Schreiber, 2015), reflecting new dispositions and considerable awareness of register and audience (Back, 2013). As with informal blog practices, these new literacies are rarely acknowledged in traditional writing or language instruction, but might potentially be leveraged in innovative pedagogies.

Research has looked at the potential of using vernacular SNSs like *Facebook* as media for formal instruction. Participation in affinity-based social network groups offers learners potential access to communities where the language of study is used in socio-pragmatically and culturally genuine ways, and the language and cultural perspectives expressed in those groups can serve as learning resources (Blattner & Fiori, 2011). Similarly, simulated SNS participation and invented SNS profiles can be used as spaces for situated learning (Mills, 2011) and developing awareness of socio-grammar (Reinhardt & Ryu, 2013). Learner-managed SNSs supplemental to formal instruction, whether sanctioned or not, can serve as spaces for genuine practice of vernacular registers and

discourses inaccessible in the formal classroom (Liaw & English, 2013). In short, SNSs can serve metaphorically as pedagogical tutors or windows onto genuine socio-pragmatic uses, tools for practice of new registers, identities, and literacies, and ecologies that bridge informal and formal uses.

Research on microblogging with *Twitter* focuses on its affordances for access to genuine discourses and communities much like other SNSs, but recognizes it also offers unique affordances because of the limitation of tweet length like focus on conciseness, speed and virality rather than on depth of content. *Twitter* can reach students anywhere at any time, which can promote a sense of social presence (Lomicka & Lord, 2011), contribute to a sense of community, and afford humor and informal language use as a means of social bonding (Hattem, 2014). While it promotes focus on information provision and sharing, *Twitter* can be used for traditional skills like vocabulary and pronunciation, offering "words of the day", and cultural access, offering real-time updates on news and events in the culture of study (Mork, 2009).

Social network-enhanced CALL sites and services (SNECSs) like *DuoLingo* and *Busuu* have become quite popular recently, increasingly blending tutorial CALL with social networking and gamification to purported positive effect. Research has made considerable effort to examine how SNECSs leverage social network mechanics for learning, how affordances for learning may differ according to site, how learners utilize, or do not utilize, specific features, and how designs in general afford learning outcomes. Research has found that users of SNECSs are motivated primarily by the potential to interact with native speakers, gamification features, and self-assessment features (Stevenson & Liu, 2010). Different SNECSs may afford certain learning activities and skills areas over others. However, lessons and materials often present decontextualized content using archaic, often ineffective methods like grammar-translation (Clark & Gruba, 2010). Culture is rarely effectively integrated and images, representations, and usage examples may be rather inauthentic (Zourou & Loiseau, 2013). User profiles may require irrelevant information from users and may not allow for adequate control of privacy, at the same time they do not offer information that is useful for peer vetting. As SNECSs rely heavily on users to peer tutor other tutors, teaching quality is reported as problematic (Orsini-Jones, Brick, & Pibworth, 2013). Users may not be provided with adequate or appropriate feedback and assessment information, leading to demotivation and high rates of attrition. In sum, SNECSs may help self-directed low to intermediate level learners memorize vocabulary and grammar, but the social networking and crowd-sourced interaction features may not address

speaking proficiency and intercultural competence very well, especially at the advanced levels, perhaps due to poor quality CALL materials and a lack of pedagogical expertise among users (Lin, Warschauer, & Blake, 2016). More critical evaluation of SNECSs that examines how particular dynamics and designs relate to and interact with learner variables, contexts, and outcomes is needed.

## Discussion

Research has found evidence that social media offer a range of potential affordances for developing language awareness, multiliteracies, audience awareness, individual and collaborative authorship, socio-pragmatic and transcultural competence, investment in new identities, and learner autonomy. Different social media technologies—blogs, wikis, social networking sites, and SNECSs—can be leveraged for L2 learning with consideration of how a particular ecology of learners, goals, contexts, and resources realize those affordances. However, affordances are not always easily available outside of informal usage contexts, because they hinge on users retaining a sense of agency, which social media technologies, when used informally, offer by providing a sense of control, production, and social participation. Findings of formal uses of social media-enhanced L2TL support this observation. For example, students do not like to use social media if they feel pressure to be grammatically perfect or show more content expertise than they feel they have (Vurdien, 2013). Too much teacher control of a social media learning task can lead students just to complete the assignment, and not benefit from its collaborative affordances (Arnold, Ducate, & Kost, 2012; Lin, Groom, & Lin, 2013). Students may not want to use social media if they find it too difficult (Kennedy & Miceli, 2013) or if they perceive it as "the wrong tool for the wrong task" (Chen, Shih, & Liu, 2015). Without structured tasks, students may use social media for communicative purposes (Kessler, 2009) and not focus on grammar. In short, when social media is used for formal purposes, it loses its potential to engage learners when it is presented as required learning assignment in which the learners have no agency.

### The challenges of everyday social media technologies

Social media site and app developers want users to retain their sense of agency because they capitalize on the production and networking activities in which

their users engage. If producing content and providing consumer information to social media companies were difficult and made explicit, users might balk at doing it for free. To support users retaining a sense of action, developers focus less on help buttons and more on user-friendly, intuitive interfaces that get users actively participating and producing as quickly as possible. Interfaces teach new users through implicit and experiential means, with minimal tutorials or training periods, and encourage learning through exploration and socialization with other users. This is perhaps one reason "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) are thought to be (and may think of themselves as) naturally "good at computers"—it may not be so much that children are better at using technology than adults, but that technology interfaces have become better at implicitly teaching children how to use them through experience, rather than explicit instruction.

In this way, digital literacies for most users of social media are learned informally (footnote here: Clearly, issues of the digital divide are considerable here. Many students enter L2 classrooms without having developed many digital, computer, or information literacies because they have little or no access to personal technologies. The "digital native" myth may unfortunately perpetuate the false assumption that these students can naturally and quickly learn how to use technology for formal uses without explicit instruction. For this reason, it is important to assess student backgrounds thoroughly before using technology in the L2 classroom, and adjust instruction accordingly). Traditionally understood, literacy is the cognitive ability to read and write—something a person has or doesn't have. In contrast, a sociocultural view of literacy (Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Barton, 2007) recognizes that reading or writing is better understood as *language use as social practice*—symbolic activities that are recognized by communities as meaningful. Because of the range of registers, varieties, domains, genres, and modalities, that meaning making entails, "literacy" may be better conceptualized in the plural as "literacies". Digital literacies, in turn, are social literacy practices in digital, technology-enhanced contexts. They share several characteristics:

1. They can be multimodal, transcultural, and polylingual in nature, and may include multiplicities of literacies in a variety of languages, cultures, identities, and affiliations.

2. They entail shifting dispositions — attitudes, inclinations, or stances — towards authorship (e.g. remixing, repurposing, sharing), identity (e.g. how

to self-present and network online), and social value (e.g. status, prestige, capital), among others.

3. They are often learned experientially through immersion, trial-and-error, and integrated tutorials. This means digital literacies are vernacular, ad hoc, and eventually everyday, habitual, and usually unanalyzed. They become part of our "habitus"—our dispositional 'taken-for-granted' understanding of the social world (Bourdieu, 1984).

As spaces for informal digital literacy practice, social media have readily become arenas for everyday socializing, entertainment, and play—domains that are often framed metaphorically in opposition to work, learning, and other school-related domains. If we are to exploit digital literacies for L2TL, we have to acknowledge we are dealing with something learned informally, bottom-up, and through socialization—quite differently than how L2TL is traditionally framed in the classroom. Moreover, different users have rather different repertoires and may be unaware of what they know and how they know it. They may feel social media are indispensable to everyday life, but not understand why or how they got that way. They may actually resist and even reject formal, explicit activities that ask them to critically situate and defamiliarize their social media habits, especially if they are forced to do so without having a say in the matter.

## Developing social media enhanced learner-autonomy

As learning moves outside the classroom and boundaries between informal and formal contexts blur, autonomy becomes ever more crucial to successful, lifelong learning and a key part of career preparedness. Social media-enhanced L2TL has great potential to develop autonomy, but it requires carefully balancing the provision of agency with the tools for awareness. Developing autonomy requires both awareness and agency—agency because it offers the possibility to explore and invest in new identities (Vandergriff, 2015), and awareness—(meta)linguistic, (inter)cultural, and (socio)pragmatic—because awareness provides the meta-cognitive tools for intentional, self-directed learning. Without agency, awareness is frustrating and even debilitating, but without awareness, agency cannot lead to sustained, autonomous learning. As noted above, social media users may be afforded agency in their informal, everyday digital practices, but it is, for the most part, without the awareness

necessary to transform those practices into autonomous and productive L2 learning activity.

Recently, scholars in L2TL have questioned the potential of traditional communicative language teaching (CLT) frameworks (e.g. Breen & Candlin, 1989) to truly develop the linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic awareness needed for L2 proficiency that can be sustained and practiced autonomously (e.g. Byrnes, 2006). In response, proponents of literacies-focused frameworks (e.g. Kern, 2000; Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010) have argued that focus on texts and the various meaning-making choices users make in designing them is a more effective pedagogical framework than CLT, especially considering that the multiplex and digital nature of meaning making today goes far beyond transactional communication. A literacies approach focuses not just on basic comprehension or production of a text, but on developing awareness of why and how particular linguistic and symbolic choices are made, and how these relate to the sociocultural purpose of a text. Texts are understood broadly as not simply print artifacts, but any spoken, written, or otherwise expressed communicative event. Grammar is presented as inextricable from context, and connected to not only ideational meaning, but also interpersonal, textual, and poetic meaning.

Several literacies-focused pedagogical frameworks have been proposed and applied to technology-mediated L2TL contexts (see Reinhardt & Thorne, 2011; also Kumagai & López-Sánchez, 2016), including multiliteracies (e.g. New London Group, 1996; Kern, 2000; Allen & Paesani, 2010), language awareness (e.g. Bolitho *et al.*, 2003), and genre awareness frameworks (e.g. Hyland, 2001). Although they are not immediately language focused, media literacy frameworks that focus on developing awareness of the production, linguistic, representational, and audience-focused aspects of media (e.g. Buckingham, 2003) also have potential. Thorne and I (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008) developed a "bridging activities" approach that aligns with multiliteracies and awareness approaches, to "facilitate the experiential and analytic awareness of digitally-mediated student selected or created texts and literacy practices" (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2011, p. 2016). In bridging activities, like most literacies-focused approaches, learners alternate through activities involving action and reflection with guidance to focus on comparison and analysis of relationships between use and social meaning.

Following a literacies-based approach, social media can be used as playgrounds or practice spaces for using language and taking on perspectives

not possible in face-to-face environments, which, when followed by reflection, can lead to awareness. For example, Mills (2011) had university-level advanced French learners use *Facebook* to develop simulated identities and interact with classmates through them. In social media-based interactions and self-presentations, learners showed evidence of the joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoires indicative of situated learning. With Ryu (Reinhardt & Ryu, 2013), I describe a project where L2 Korean learners used *Facebook* to role play interactions among Koreans of various statuses and ages, in order to practice the use of Korean Internet language and socio-grammatical markers in an authentic, relatable environment. Learners analyzed each other's interactions and discussed the relationship between language register and socio-pragmatic meanings. Yen, Hou, & Chang (2015) had teams of EFL learners use social media as a space for business role-plays and practicing a variety of business interaction types—negotiation, brainstorming, and discussion. In short, when social media is used as a learning space for both action and reflection, awareness can be raised if learners retain agency and perceive the instructional parameters as authentic.

To leverage the potentials of social media, user agency should be allowed through thoughtful task design. Learners should be provided with the true capacity to act by being allowed choices and control where possible, to engage in self-directed activity, and invest in activity outcomes. Tasks should mirror genuine uses of social media, promoting multimodal, transcultural, and polylingual expression of identities where appropriate, and practicing what might be understood as social networking literacies—which include not just simulation and performance, but appropriation, judgement, and networking (Solmaz, 2015). When learners can practice agency and have a say in the parameters of their learning, awareness of how to make meaning in new L2 digital contexts can be empowering, not debilitating. Awareness activities can focus on developing linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic knowledge at increasing levels of meta-cognition—familiarity, comprehension, and mastery. It is important to develop critical awareness of social media itself, how and why it functions as it does, and how our experiences with it and dispositions towards it impact our lives both positively and negatively. While technological determinism is to be avoided, it does not mean that media, including social media, is entirely neutral and without influence, as recent elections in the USA and Britain have shown the world. Developing awareness of not only how language means and what it means, but how it is used to construct social realities in digital spaces is a key aspect of true proficiency, in both first and second languages.

## Conclusion

Digital technology was once exotic and accessible to most people only in schools, and CALL scholars like Bax (2003; 2011) thought that integration and normalization to the point of seamless invisibility was key to harnessing its potential to afford learning in new, more effective ways. Since then, social media technologies have ironically themselves become invisible and normalized into nearly all walks of everyday life, except the classroom. As they break down this final barrier, educators are obliged to situate them critically and teach how to use them, or else they and their students risk being used by such tools. Formal learning tasks that leverage these affordances must take into account the fact that learners come into the classroom with unexamined dispositions, beliefs, and habitus towards these technologies because they are no longer exceptional, but habitual. If we want language learners to use social media for autonomous, intentional learning, formal applications need to foster, maintain, and respect user agency while developing learner awareness of the socio-cultural, technological, symbolic and interactional dynamics that impact how social media are, and can be, used for both informal and formal learning purposes. Learners with considerable experiential knowledge may resist formal uses that conflict with their informal repertoires and expectations, while those with less may be quite grateful for direct training. A pedagogy that leverages social media practices for developing L2 learner autonomy should support learner agency by promoting user choice and self-directed learning, at the same time it develops critical awareness of how technological mediatization and language choice together impact meaning making.

We are witnessing disruptive effects by digital social media on traditional educational structures, which for many have become socially irrelevant and disconnected from the real world. Formal schooling increasingly seems to privilege standardized assessment and "teaching to the test", thereby delegitimizing informal, creative, and social literacy practices, including those involving digital media—even though they are often highly specialized and demonstrate considerable semiotic facility and agility. The novelty of this disruption, however, may be overstated. Standage (2013) shows that throughout history communication technologies—from the cuneiform tablets of Mesopotamia to the message scrolls of ancient Rome to the commonplace books of 17th century England—have always supported vernacular, everyday literacy practices like note-taking, gossip and news sharing. They have always had disruptive effects on formal, standardized literacy practices because they flatten access to information (Jenkins, 2006), and support multiple authorship,

multimodality, non-linearity, and virality, which enable dispositions antithetical to traditional norms. In other words, the stuff of transformative practice has always been hidden in the mundane and vernacular, and if we recognize the authenticity and legitimacy of the everyday in social media, we might harness its potential to great educational benefit. Research shows social media can serve as authentic arenas for social interaction, windows onto genuine linguistic and cultural practice, mirrors for reflective learning, and stages for self-presentation and the development of new identities. Social media offer the means to develop L2 learner autonomy, as long as we allow learners to practice agency in them, and are thoughtful in how we raise learner awareness of why and how to do so.

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