37 Telecollaboration in online communities for L2 learning

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Abstract

This paper reports on a PhD study about informal second language learning in online communities (Livemocha and Busuu). In these communities learners autonomously seek opportunities for telecollaboration with Native Speakers (NSs) in the absence of teachers and pedagogical tasks, and in an informal context. This paper focuses on learning and social resources of these communities as a support for tandem activities. The methodology adopted had an interpretative framework and consisted of six phases. Results showed that these online environments have a potential for learners to engage in naturalistic repair trajectories. The conclusions that can be drawn from this study are that, despite today's flourishing of social media and new technologies, tandem language learning still presents the same challenges and more investigation is required on the adequate support learners need.

Keywords: online communities, telecollaboration, tandem, learner autonomy, reciprocity.

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1.   Introduction

Tandem language learning refers to a language exchange in which two learners who are native speakers of each other's target language work together. For a successful tandem partnership, the principles of reciprocity and autonomy need to be observed (Little & Brammerts, 1996), that is, both learners need to benefit equally and take ownership of their language learning. Tandem exchanges have taken place over time in a number of different formats, from face-to-face, letter writing, e-mail, to videoconferencing initiatives. With the arrival of the Internet, the potential for encounters with tandem partners increased exponentially, each new technology opening up a new range of possibilities.

In the realm of online communities designed specifically for Second Language (L2) learning, the literature has shed light on their affordances and constraints from technical and pedagogical points of view, and has stressed that online communities could play an important role if integrated in formal learning and in telecollaborative practices (Brick, 2011; Chotel, 2012; Chotel & Mangenot, 2011; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Lloyd, 2012; Gonzales, 2012).

This paper presents partial results of a PhD thesis (Malerba, 2015a) on L2 learning in the online communities of *Livemocha* and *Busuu*, addressing the pedagogical needs of online learners and highlighting the importance of the design of learning environments for tandem language in out-of-class informal and semi-formal contexts.

2.   Methodology

This study applies Engeström's (1987) model of Activity Theory (AT) to online communities for language learning to explain the division of labour and the social roles and norms among learners. This methodology, gradually narrowing the scope, consisted of six phases, and the results of each phase fed into the design of the following one.

- Contextualisation and identification of *Livemocha* and *Busuu* online communities.

- Participant observation of learners' learning experience in these online communities.

- Administration of an online survey to find out about learners' language learning experience.

- Semi-structured interviews to elicit more information about learners' subjective experience and perceptions of these communities.

- Identification of case studies and a micro-analysis of their online interactions to identify the ways in which they create opportunities for L2 use.

- Recall interviews to trace knowledge of the participants' learning experience over time.

In this way, throughout the different phases, a progressively deeper understanding of the behaviours enacted by learners in these communities was developed.

3.   Results

Three learner profiles emerged from the analysis (Malerba, 2015b).

- The course taker, who is merely engaged with the learning affordances (didactic units and exercise corrections) of the communities and who has limited social exchanges with peers.

- The social networker, who is fully engaged with the social affordances (the chat tool) of the communities.

- The social course taker, who is a hybrid between the two previous profiles and who is the most likely to take the most out of the experience in the communities.

Under the lens of AT, the three profiles can be analysed as such (see Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3).

Figure 1.   The learning activity of the 'course taker' adapted from Engeström's (1987) model
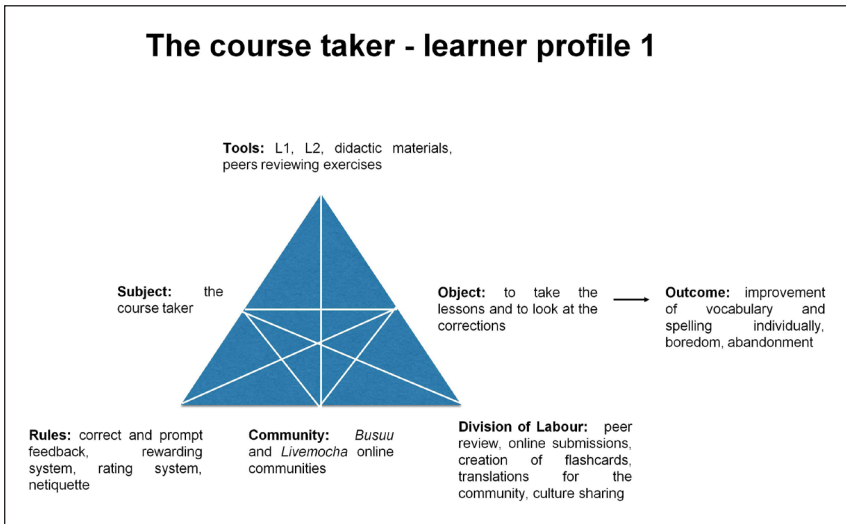
As Figure 1 shows, the learning content (*tools*) mediates the relationship between the course taker (*subject*) and his learning and sharing (*object*), which is the main aim of online communities. Moreover, in the case of the course taker, the relationship between learners (*subject*) and the completion of the didactic affordances (*object*) is mediated by a set of norms (*rules*) that are quite explicit and have been established in the community. In the case of the course taker, the collaborative practices (*division of labour*) are generated mainly by the peer review system. But, according to the perceptions of the learners interviewed, the lack and/or poor quality of peer feedback caused demotivation among learners.

Figure 2.   The learning activity of the 'social networker' adapted from Engeström's (1987) model
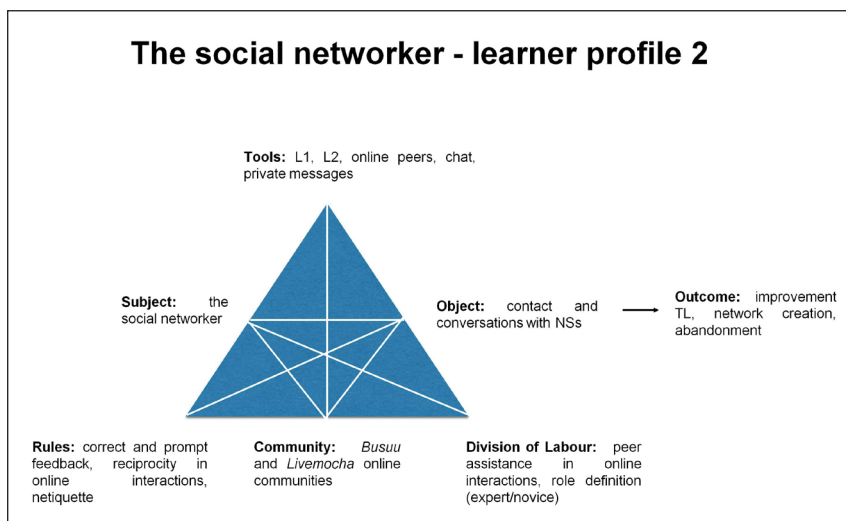
In the case of the social networker (Figure 2), the relationship between the online platforms (*community*) and the contact with NSs (*object*) is mediated by the exchanges and the opportunities for interactions (*division of labour*) among the participants occurring in the chat tool. For the social networker, the division of labour occurs mainly in the online chat tool and in a minority of cases through private messages (asynchronous tool) (*tools*). The norms (*rules*) of the social networker coincide with the norms of tandem language learning, are learned during the interactions and are constantly shaped according to the language partner.

As Figure 3 suggests, the social course taker's (*subject*) relationship with the platforms (*community*) is mediated by the social affordances (*tools*/chat), the didactic affordances (*tools*/learning materials), the L1 (or L2 in which he is proficient), and by the TL itself. The aim (*object*) of this learner is both the contact with NSs and reinforcing the knowledge of the TL through the learning units in collaboration with the peers encountered in the community. The norms (*rules*) combine the norms of the course taker and the norms of the social networker.

Figure 3.   The learning activity of the 'social course taker' adapted from Engeström's (1987) model
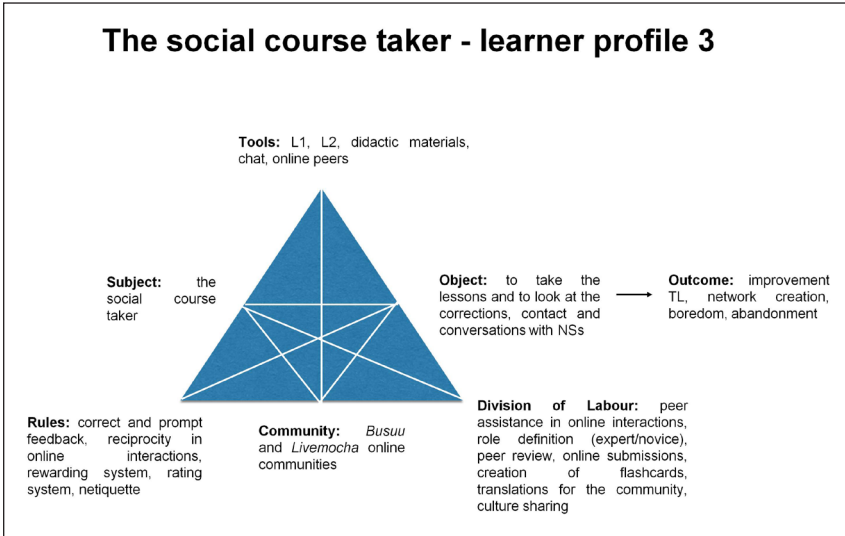
4.   Discussion

Drawing on the analysis, some tensions and contradictions arose. First of all, there is no synergy between the learning and the social affordances of the communities. The design of the didactic units, rather than favouring contact and collaboration with NSs, isolates learners and engages them in repetitive behaviourist-like exercises. Another contradiction regards the presence of learners with different objectives and rules. When learners from different profiles meet, tensions cannot be avoided.

5.   Conclusion

This leads us to the conclusion that social and learning affordances in online communities should work in synergy towards a common objective. Therefore, a

task-based language teaching approach would be key for the success of tandem partnerships in these communities.

Comparing Appel's (1999) study on tandem language learning through emails, with Malerba's (2015a) study on tandem in online communities, it is evident that even though technology has developed and the environments have changed, we are still finding the same positive outcomes as well as the same challenges to cope with. New approaches and different supports for an effective tandem experience, both in terms of sustainability as well as learning gains, are still needed. A new recent attempt towards this direction is represented by the TandemMOOC initiative (Appel & Pujolà, 2015), which is a hybrid between social and course environments.

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