

INFORMAL LANGUAGE LEARNING IN AUTHENTIC SETTING, USING MOBILE DEVICES AND SNS

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ABSTRACT

One of the challenges of teaching a foreign language in non-immersive contexts, is extending the exposure of learners to the target language, beyond school hours. Since it is quite common to find linguistic and cultural exponents of foreign languages, in authentic contexts (i.e., the "Linguistic Landscape"), those exponents may serve as triggers for students to interact and engage with the foreign language, on a daily basis. Using mobile devices and social media to increase awareness to the exponents, may facilitate foreign language learning outside the classroom and across settings. This paper describes an approach for designing an informal, contextual, foreign language learning experience. Students were encouraged to utilize their mobile devices in order to document the presence of Spanish exponents in their surroundings and to share them in a dedicated Facebook group. The findings suggest that this approach may hold the potential to increase learner awareness to language learning opportunities, thus supplementing formal learning in the classroom and encouraging a continuous learning process.

KEYWORDS

Mobile Learning, Informal Learning, Linguistic Landscape, SNSs.

1. INTRODUCTION

When learning a foreign language, students should get as much exposure to the target language as possible. This is especially important when learning takes place in non-immersive contexts, where the target language is not prevalent. Furthermore, language learning encloses much more than just learning the formal aspects of the language and hence, pragmatic and socio-cultural aspects should become an integral part of the language learning curriculum (Verhelst et al., 2009).

Technology has the potential to support language learning opportunities in versatile ways (Lai & Gu, 2011). Learning theories have stressed the importance of learning in authentic, relevant, contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and ubiquitous mobile devices may support such contextual learning in authentic settings. Mobile technologies can further support learning by allowing for learner immersion, enhancing engagement and increasing the motivation for learning (Dieterle & Dede, 2007; Sharples et al., 2007). Social network sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, can be used for educational purposes by serving as informal learning environments and as supplemental tools for formal learning (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). SNSs may facilitate a collaborative process of knowledge building, by creating a sense of community and encouraging discussion (Wodzicki et al., 2012; Zhang, 2010).

The task described in this paper was designed with the intention of raising student's awareness to language exponents in their daily surroundings, by using the "Linguistic Landscape" (LL) as an input source. Initial definitions of the LL were quite restrictive and referred mainly to the "visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). However, more recent studies point out the necessity to go beyond this definition and to "include images, sounds, drawings and movement, in line with current theories about multimodality" (Shohamy, 2012). Past research on the potential of the LL for language learning had suggests that the LL could contribute to language learning by serving as a source of authentic input for the development of pragmatic competence and literacy skills, as well as for raising student's language awareness (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008). The objective of the current pilot study was to encourage a continuous interaction with the target language (Spanish), by increasing awareness to Spanish exponents in the LL and also, to create a flow between the classroom, the

daily surroundings and the digital sphere, which serves as the informal learning environment. Language awareness is a complex construct which requires a holistic approach, in this paper we refer to awareness in the context of language learning, as “the learner’s knowledge or subjective experience that he/she is detecting a stimulus” (Al-Hejin, 2004). The stimulus in this case, is the language exponent, found in the LL. From this perspective, capturing and sharing an exponent suggests that there is awareness to its existence. Taking a soci-constructivist perspective, learning is viewed as a social process, resulting from an active participation in a collaborative creation of knowledge. This knowledge can, in turn, serve as a basis for other learners in their learning processes (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2003; Stahl, 2000).

2. STUDY APPROACH

The study was conducted over a period of a full school year (two-semester) but participation in the task was not mandatory. Students were asked to capture Spanish related exponents, as they encountered them in their daily surroundings and share them on a dedicated Facebook group with a short description, in Spanish. Thus, participants were essentially interacting with the foreign language in both a receptive (capturing the exponents) and a productive (sharing and adding information and description) manner, as well as interacting with the other participants in the group. The task was intentionally loosely defined and open-ended in order to allow as much room as possible for student expression and for interaction. In this sense, the task was mainly designed to create opportunities to experience unplanned encounters with linguistic exponents and to encourage communication and interaction between the participants.

The study takes an exploratory, qualitative approach, focusing on the analysis of the types of exponents that students chose to post, as well as on the resulting interaction patterns.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Exponents and Student Interaction Patterns

28 students, out of the 52 students who had joined the Facebook group, chose to actively share one exponent or more. A total of 83 exponents were shared, out of which, 59 were photos, 10 links, 11 Videos and 3 were textual status updates. The posts were versatile and included Spanish dishes, photos of signs in Spanish, Spanish and Mexican restaurants names, Spanish related events and more. The content of the exponents can be classified into two groups: textual content (such as street signs or venue names) and visual content (such as photos of dishes or events). The majority of posts (65 out of the 83 posts) referred to the physical surroundings but several students chose to capture digital (as opposed to physical) exponents, such as video clips in Spanish or links to Spanish related commercials.

The exponents shared by students, suggest varying levels of awareness that may go beyond the definition of “detecting a stimulus” (Al-Hejin, 2004) and indicates understanding, noticing, communicating emotions and reminiscing, as described in the following examples:

- One student posted a photo of a venue named “*Alegria*” (joy- in Spanish) and commented “*Alegria!*” (With an exclamation mark) implying not only acknowledgment of the Spanish word, but also an understanding of it.
- A student posted a photo of a coffee cup with “*¡Precaución caliente!*” (Caution hot) warning in different languages, among them Spanish. Indicating awareness to a message, written on a daily item that is normally unnoticed.
- Another student explicitly acknowledged something that she hadn’t noticed up until that point- “*no sabia que tenemos..en Israel*” (I didn’t know that Spanish ballrooms exist in Israel).

3.2 Instructor Interaction Patterns

Three instructors participated actively in the group. Instructor interaction can be categorized into three main roles- Exemplary role, Supportive role and Instructive role, as detailed below.

Exemplary role: In order to kick start the activities and demonstrate the idea of language exponents, the instructors created the first few posts of exponents that they had encountered. In addition, the instructors served as “models” of the culture of the target language by postings exponents from their lives, for example, two instructors posted photos of typical Spanish dishes that they had prepared at home.

Supportive role: Instructors often included emphatic expressions in their comments to posts, such as “*¡qué bueno!*” (Great!) or “*estupendo*” (wonderful), in order to express support and encouragement and create an environment where students feel safe and secure, even to make mistakes. Instructors also showed encouragement by using the “like” button for each post. In addition, instructions provided affective feedback- for example, one instructor expressed her personal fondness for a location (a bar) that a student had posted “*Uno de mis bares favoritos de los pocos que conozco*” (One of my favorites bars, of the few I know).

Instructive role: Instructors encouraged communication in Spanish and often pointed to formal aspects of the Spanish language. For example, an instructor used one of the posts as a learning opportunity and commented on the correct use of exclamation marks in Spanish in one of the posts “*¡Qué bien! Incluso se ve el signo de exclamación al comienzo y al final.*” (That’s nice! you can even see the exclamation marks at the beginning and the end). In another case, a student posted a photo of a yacht named “*hispaniola*” and the instructor encourages a discussion by noting the historical context implied by the name of the Yacht “*¿Es tu yate, Roni? Si no, es interesante saber quién da a su yate el mismo nombre que la isla a donde llega Cristóbal Colón...*” (Is this your Yacht? If not, it would be interesting to know who names his Yacht with the same name as the island where Christopher Columbus arrived at).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Learning a language entails more than just memorizing formal linguistic structures and cannot be separated from social and contextual aspects (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008). By becoming actively aware of language exponents in their surroundings, the participants of this study were effectively acting as active explorers, recognizing and seizing learning opportunities around them in authentic contexts, while being supported and encouraged by the virtual community (Dieterle & Dede, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sharples et al., 2007). Mobile technology and social media enabled a seamless and immediate experience by allowing students to capture and upload the exponents, as well as to add information and interact in real time. In reply to a comment on her post, one student noted “*a hora est oya qui*” (I am here now!), expressing, in this sense, the immediate and authentic aspect of the experience, enabled by the mobile device. The Facebook group provided learners with a space to interact, as they engaged both cognitively and affectively with the task.

The notion of the Linguistic Landscape initially referred to the physical context but was extended beyond its original definition (Shohamy, 2012). Our findings suggest that this concept should be further enhanced to include the **digital** sphere as well. Students, though not explicitly guided to do so, naturally shared exponents from both their physical and digital surroundings. We conclude that the digital sphere has become an integral part of our reality and hence, should be considered a part of the LL.

As for the types of exponents that were located and shared from the LL, we noted that two aspects, critical to language learning, correspond with the two types of exponents that students chose to share; the formal linguistic aspect and the cultural aspect, match exponents containing textual and visual content respectively. Further research should analyze the two types of exponents and possible ways for enhancing learning opportunities that arise from each type.

We found that the participation rate in the group decreased over time, both in terms of the rate of posting as well as the number of views. A possible explanation may be that students were not motivated enough to participate in this non mandatory task and may have lost interest, once the novelty of the task wore off. Holding class discussions related to the posts shared by students, may serve as means for acknowledging the contribution of the students to the learning process, thus increasing motivation for participation in the task. We believe that bringing the informal, digital world into the classroom in such a way, may strengthen the sense of continuity between the classroom and the external assignments, breaking the time-space classroom

boundaries. We also conclude from the findings, that facilitation is needed in order to encourage the discussion both in class and on the SNS. Those strategies should be further explored, as well as additional ways for encouraging discussion among students and discussing topics such as cultural and historical aspects of the target language.

This project served as an exploratory task for both instructors and students. Overall, the results appear to be encouraging but there is a need to further investigate, replicate and enhance the experience. We are planning on conducting a similar exercise next year, taking into account the lessons learned from the first year trial and discussed in this paper.

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