

Addressing the impact of informal language learning practices in digital wilds on the development of L2 digital literacies

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Abstract. An extensive number of studies acknowledge the transformed nature of literacies by building on the complexity of multimodal semiotic repertoires and available digital resources (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2019; Toffoli, 2020). The exposure to such resources and tools makes digital literacies dynamic as environments provide students with opportunities to apply their skills in praxis through trial and failure. Among the existing conceptual constructs that might help discuss the complex nature of online digital informal learning practices and their connection to L2 digital literacies, the framework of dynamic systems theory (Larsen–Freeman, 2019) is implemented. Qualitative methodology was employed to explain whether informal language learning practices are conducive to constructing L2 digital literacies among pre-service language teachers. Relevant pedagogical implications are discussed.

Keywords: informal language learning, L2 digital literacies, pre-service teachers, online digital environments.

1. Introduction

The development of digital information and communication systems established appropriate circumstances for a wide range of literacy practices to coexist. While in a traditional sense, the capacity to read and encode written language was understood as literacy, the term ‘digital literacies’ extended an existing notion for embracing the affordances of digital environments by building on the concepts of

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computer literacy, multimedia literacy, and information literacy (Scribner & Cole, 2013). To a great extent, the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies were the primary driving forces in reshaping literacy by adding ontological shifts in connection to emerging modalities which are reflected in the usage of emojis, voice and video messages, and the integration of images for transmitting and receiving messages through different modes.

Reinhardt and Thorne (2019) characterise the change in interpretation of L2 digital literacies in connection to their “participatory, multifarious, and informal” features and the engagement in digital wilds that shifted from being extensively consumption-oriented towards being more interactive and producible (p. 9). In supporting this point, Chen (2020) claims that being digitally literate means knowing how to operate specific digital tools and recognising the situated nature of literacies for establishing meaningful communication. As one of the most challenging contemporary issues for language instructors is to effectively educate students for successful and meaningful engagement in a social universe composed of many literacies, many of which exist outside traditional academic realms, researchers argue that the concept of L2 digital literacies should be addressed through bridging informal and formal learning practices (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2019). Hence, this study depicts the reported experience of developing L2 digital literacies in informal online spaces and of underlining possible pedagogical implications by building on the example of undergraduate pre-service language teachers.

2. Conceptual framework

Among the existing conceptual constructs that might help discuss the complex nature of online digital informal learning practices and their connection to L2 digital literacies, the framework of Complex Dynamic Systems (CDS) theory (Larsen–Freeman, 2019) seems central. Complex systems framework acknowledges the plurality of individual, socio-political, and socio-cultural levels that occur across spatial and temporal scales and function by exerting influence on each other. Prior studies support its relevance and applicability in encompassing the non-linearity and dynamism of language acquisition, which could be observed when considering language development phases and affecting determinants (Larsen–Freeman, 2019; Toffoli, 2020).

The application of CDS theory to empirical investigations about informal language learning practices remains scarce. Among existing studies, Jurkovič (2019) distinguished four pivotal components in digital learning practices that interact

together, namely: online users, online environments, social context, and formal language instruction framework. Integrating this conceptualisation to informal language learning practices allows depicting the ‘habitat’ of contemporary informal language learners with online users as key actors, online environments that provide multitudinous digital affordances, broader contextual peculiarities (e.g. language status, contextual language policies), and formal language instruction framework. By adopting the stance of analysing the perceived impact of students’ informal language learning practices, this work aims at addressing perceptions about the L2 digital literacies development in formal and informal learning spaces with a research question that stands as follows: to what extent are informal language learning practices conducive in constructing students L2 digital literacies?

3. Method

To address perceptions of student teachers related to the perceived development of L2 digital literacies, we employed face-to-face and online semi-structured interviews with 32 pre-service English language teachers (25 female; 7 male) enrolled in undergraduate degrees at six different higher education institutions in Kazakhstan. The interviews were conducted as part of a doctoral research project, lasted from 60 to 90 minutes, and consisted of questions addressing experiential beliefs regarding the engagement in informal learning activities and its perceived associated impact. The choice of participants was guided by the need to select individuals whose level of English proficiency was considered higher than average in the context of Kazakhstan. Hence, the study sample was represented by students majoring in Foreign Languages programme dedicated to training future foreign language teachers with 7 male and 25 female students representing six different institutions.

4. Results and discussion

To begin, availability of open access resources and awareness about digital affordances were reported to impact students’ engagement in social-oriented technological experiences that occur within global social media platforms (i.e. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok). Interviewees, who indicated their frequent engagement in informal learning (N=12), considered themselves part of a global community of L2 learners that allows them to be exposed to authentic language content, thus, impacting their L2 digital literacies. Although all interviewees reported being more engaged in receptive informal learning practices (e.g.

reading and listening-centred activities), all informants noted positive influence on L2 digital literacies associated with their engagement in productive informal language learning practices. Participants with insignificant and limited experience in informal productive language learning practices (N=7) were found to have a lower willingness to communicate with unfamiliar people. Several interviewees considered online discussions as unsafe environments. In particular, two female participants seemed to be intimidated by the idea of participating in online discussions.

Another crucial finding was that the development of L2 digital literacies is reported to be linked to critical thinking skills. Rephrasing [Chen \(2020\)](#), students involved in practices of making sense of texts in online environments are more prone to learn the features and mechanisms of the language used online such as sarcasm, everyday slang, and any other non-academic language structures. In other words, students learn how to differentiate their discursive identities, choose appropriate words, grammar, and other language devices to sound natural. Our findings confirmed this stance as experienced informal language users (N=12) reported learning about different language functions and forms of language through their engagement or mere observations of online communicative practices (e.g. on forum discussions, blog posts, or comments in social media). However, what is more, exposure to different views and opinions was found to facilitate critical reflection of the content by considering and juxtaposing different perspectives stated by people of different origins and cultural backgrounds.

The analysis of interviews demonstrated that approximately half of participants (N=14) expect language instructors to acknowledge the affordances of digital environments by not simply adapting communicative approaches but, more importantly, conventions related to digital genres. In comparison to traditional language forms, which are usually covered within the frameworks of university sessions, this study's participants seem to believe that contemporary classroom practices should be constructed to bridge formal and informal environments. Participants, who reported being frequent informal language users, state that assignments should go beyond conventional language structures and more time should be dedicated to introducing different language forms.

Finally, four participants from different universities were found to have surprisingly low levels of L2 digital literacy and limited awareness of online social media spaces in comparison to most interviewees. Interestingly, several experienced informal language learners also acknowledged their initial unpreparedness to web-based interactions and urged language instructors to allow students to experiment with

unconventional genres at both school and university levels. Such findings support prior findings of Reinhardt and Thorne (2019) and Yu and Zadorozhnyy (2021) who emphasised the importance of altering ‘anachronistic’ conventional language teaching approaches and recommended L2 instructors to consider integrating multimodal composition and digital storytelling projects to expose students to non-standard language forms (Yu & Zadorozhnyy, 2021).

5. Conclusions

Although we can refer to current generations of learners as digital natives, they still need to learn how to effectively exploit existing digital affordances to pursue language learning objectives. In alignment with prior studies, Kazakhstan interviewees recognise the need to address L2 digital literacies through purposefully planned activities in structured environments to learn about existing differences between colloquial and academic English(es). Therefore, with the augmented exposure of L2 learners to authentic language patterns in digital wilds, Kazakhstan language instructors need to acknowledge the importance of bridging informal and formal learning and consider the role of student L2 digital literacies in this process.

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