

# Testing the Waters: Developing Interlanguage Pragmatics through Exploration, Experimentation, and Participation in Online Communities

*Ellen Yeh<sup>1</sup> and Nicholas Swinehart<sup>2</sup>*

## Abstract

This study presents an innovative approach to developing interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) by training students to engage in online participatory cultures and analyzing their participation through the lens of communities of practice. Participants were university-level English language learners studying in the United States who were trained on the basic layout and practices of a social news and discussion site (Reddit), then assigned weekly postings within forums based on their individual interests. Social media engagement metrics (upvotes and responses) were used to measure and observe the quantity and quality of online interaction, and post-task questionnaires and follow-up interviews investigated learner perceptions about the language and cyberpragmatics in the online communities they encountered. Quantitative results show that participants struggled to achieve high levels of interaction with other users, but qualitative results indicate a wide range of potential benefits for ILP exploration and development. The findings and implications of this study contribute towards best practices in developing strategies for ILP in online spaces and cyberpragmatic awareness among language learners, enabling them to reach higher levels of participation in online communities.

**KEYWORDS:** COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE; CYBERPRAGMATICS; INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATICS; ONLINE AFFINITY SPACES; REDDIT.

---

## Affiliations

<sup>1</sup>Columbia College Chicago, USA.  
email: eyeh@colum.edu

<sup>2</sup>University of Chicago, USA.  
email: nswinehart@uchicago.edu

## Introduction

While popular non-academic theories maintain that the “one simple trick” to learning a language is to simply use it every day, in reality learners can struggle to find opportunities for meaningful communication in the target language. Even international students studying in the United States, who on the surface are immersed in an English-speaking world, can often find themselves isolated with few opportunities to use English socially outside the classroom (Almon, 2014; Núñez, Rios-Aguilar, Kanno, & Flores, 2016). Online communities present one venue for language learners to increase target-language communication and participation, allowing individuals to build relationships by interacting in a virtual space (Moore & Chuang, 2017). In language learning, online communities have been applied as spaces for language and literacy pedagogies, such as using online fan fiction to further motivate CMC language instruction (Sauro, 2017) and emphasizing digital discourses associated with the use of hashtags on social media and digital games (Sykes, 2019). Online communities remove many of the constraints that learners may encounter due to geographic location, lack of social connections, and affective factors such as shyness or anxiety. They are asynchronous, are asynchronous and therefore can be accessed repeatedly and at any time. In addition, learners can spend more time inconspicuously observing the behavior of others than they can in physical environments. They are typically built around users’ shared interests (i.e., online affinity spaces), which can lead to higher motivation and engagement (Dörnyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006). However, these online spaces have an overlapping matrix of linguistic and cultural norms and practices; some are common across the Internet (e.g., memes and trolling), some are unique to the platform where the community is hosted (e.g., Tumblr or Facebook), and some are unique to the particular topic or community. These transnational and constantly changing norms and practices can form barriers to entry for new participants but also serve as spaces for the “pragmatic exploration and experimentation that are fundamental to the development of interlanguage pragmatic (ILP) skills” (Sykes, 2018, p. 132).

The combination of diverse topics and platforms for online communities leads to an immense number of environments, each with their own pragmatic rules and behaviors, making it impossible for language instructors to directly teach learners idealized models of pragmatic formulae (Sykes, 2017). Instead, we propose here that instructors can help students acquire the skills they need to build the necessary pragmatic knowledge of each context on their own through an ongoing cycle of observation, analysis, and participation (Sykes, 2017; Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008).

## Literature Review

### Cyberpragmatics

This study describes a practice to help language learners build pragmatic knowledge within online environments. The term “cyberpragmatics” was introduced in 2001 as a form of cognitive pragmatics in the field of Internet-mediated communication (Yus, 2001) and is defined as “the analysis of how information is produced and interpreted within the Internet environment” (Yus, 2011, p. 13). Yus (2011) identified pragmatic behaviors occurring in six digitally-mediated environments, including self-presentation and identity in online contexts (i.e., online profile design), website design and development, social networking interaction (e.g., blogging, hashtagging, tweeting), virtual conversation, use of email, and politeness in online interaction. But while Yus provides a detailed exploration of pragmatic behaviors in online environments, his work is not aimed at helping users develop cyberpragmatic skills, nor at language learners attempting to develop ILP in online settings. Sykes (2017) connects cyberpragmatics with language teaching, noting that the proliferation of emerging digital spaces means “patterns for communication and interpreting meaning are increasingly difficult to define, isolate, and teach” (p. 128). Further, Sykes identifies the paradigm shift from consuming Internet content as a main pedagogical approach to co-constructing content online:

Digital technologies have made it possible to complexify the pragmatic content to be taught by expanding from a focus on routine formulae and isolated speech acts to a more comprehensive approach which entails a focus on co-constructed interaction and the dynamic nature of pragmatic skills. (Sykes, 2018, p. 124)

The co-constructed nature of these environments adds another layer of complexity for language learners because in order to participate in social practices, they must be able to interact with target language users and produce content appropriately (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009; Thorne, Sauro, & Smith, 2015).

To prepare language learners for these emerging digital spaces, we draw on previous work in raising pragmatic awareness. Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) provide two key pedagogical practices for teaching pragmatics: (1) exposing language learners to authentic language production and content as models for them to observe, and (2) allowing language learners time to explore and analyze the input before interpreting and participating in the conversation. Similarly, in their discussion of bridging activities (i.e., activities that bridge in-class tasks and scaffolding with students’ out-of-class interests and digital practices), Thorne and Reinhardt (2008) stress the importance of raising language awareness through an iterative cycle of observation and collection, guided exploration and analysis, and creation and participation.

Social networks are “noteworthy digital contexts for the teaching and learning of ILP” (Sykes, 2017, p. 132) due to the direct human-to-human interaction and communication, and these platforms allow for rich pragmatic data and analysis (Sykes, 2018). In this study we investigate opportunities for ILP and cyberpragmatic development by drawing on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) communities of practice (CoP) framework and Gee’s (2004) affinity spaces, a particular kind of community built around shared interests rather than offline relationships.

### **Communities of Practice and Online Affinity Spaces**

This study presents an approach to develop ILP by training students to engage in online participatory cultures and analyze their participation through the lenses of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) within CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and online affinity spaces, which differ in the way they view experienced-based hierarchies within communities. The CoP framework proposes learning as a process in which novices or less experienced community members learn from experts or more experienced community members about the core community practices, working their way from the periphery towards the center as they progress. These roles are often described as “outsiders” and “insiders” (e.g., Morita, 2004). Given help from experienced group members through CoP, individuals are able to gain knowledge and develop skills so that they can apply them appropriately in the given context. Online communities can be included in this framework, as the necessary components for a CoP are “continual negotiation of joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire” (Reinhardt & Zander, 2011, p. 329). Through interaction in these online spaces, language learners are able to access communities, access communities, genres, norms, and cultures that help develop the pragmatic knowledge required to participate in target language practices (Warschauer, 2004). These processes of LPP are required to “fully experience language as a social practice and develop a communicative/interactive competence” (Blattner & Fiori, 2011, p. 25).

The present study uses online affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) as environments for language learners’ pragmatic and participatory experimentation. Online affinity spaces are identified as virtual online communities that develop around “groups of people with common interests who interact through the Internet and the Web, such as communities of transactions and communities of interest” (Vossen & Hagemann, 2007, p. 59). While CoP envisions a hierarchical dichotomy between insider and outsider, online affinity spaces offer many different routes to participation and status, where “the whole continuum of people from unskilled to highly skilled, from minorly interested to addicted, and everything in between, is accommodated in the same space” (Gee, 2004, p. 85). Jenkins

(2006) suggests that affinity spaces foster new participatory cultures that could offer ideal learning environments, while Gee (2004) also claims that affinity spaces are informal learning cultures that allow learners to actively participate, become motivated to learn more, and be involved in more conversations and interactions about topics they find more interesting than learning from textbooks. Within affinity spaces, individuals are able to choose various ways to participate based on their interests and skills, allowing learners to “feel like an expert while tapping the expertise of others” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 9).

The current study uses Reddit as a platform to investigate language learners’ ILP experiences because this platform provides conversations emerging from the contribution and promotion of members that include both experts and non-experts (Moore & Chuang, 2017). Based on Fraser and Dutta’s (2008) social media typologies, Reddit is categorized as a passion-centric network, meaning it brings together users who share the same interests, similar to Gee’s (2004) online affinity spaces. This platform fosters discussion outside of the traditional classroom within over one million subcultures (i.e., subreddits). Previous studies of Reddit focused on various aspects of its communities, participation patterns, and social and cultural norms. Moore & Chuang (2017) investigated motivational factors and found that socializing for community building, entertaining, and status-seeking are significant predictors of active participation. Other studies have examined conversation patterns in Reddit (Choi et al., 2015), the interaction between user experience and quality of content (Lim, Carman, & Wong, 2017), predicting comments and upvote scores (Weninger, Zhu, & Han, 2013), and relationships between content and popularity (Stoddard, 2015). In terms of the development of ILP, Reddit presents learners with environments full of complex discussion centered around an extremely wide range of topics, so that all learners can find communities built around their personal interests.

One challenge to integrating affinity spaces like those found on Reddit into the language curriculum is that since affinity spaces are not controlled learning environments, it is difficult and often impossible for instructors to guide students toward desired interactions and outcomes like they can in the classroom. Therefore, it is essential to assist language learners to acquire the in acquiring the knowledge of how to autonomously build relationships by developing rapport with interlocutors through their words and behaviors in the affinity space (Gonzales, 2013). Gee (2004) proposes that spaces, rather than membership in classrooms or workplace contexts, are the social contexts where individuals *choose* to participate and learn, and one goal of the use of affinity spaces in this study is that students will continue to participate in these spaces outside of class assignments, since the spaces are built around their interests and topics they chose.

The present article contributes to the existing literature by examining language learners' participation in online affinity spaces as a means of pragmatic exploration and experimentation by investigating the following research questions:

1. To what extent are language learners able to engage in discussion in online affinity spaces?
2. Are learners able to increase the quality of their interaction as they become more experienced within the community?
3. To what extent do online affinity spaces provide opportunities for language learners to develop ILP through observation, participation, and analysis?

## Methodology

### Participants

The current study collected data from 15 English language learners enrolled in a university in the Midwestern United States. All participants were international students from China, 12 females and three males, who had never studied in English-speaking countries and who had scored between 78 and 112 on the iBT TOEFL.

### Platform

Reddit was chosen as the platform for this project because it is a collection of 1.2 million forums or “subreddits,” each built around a separate topic or interest but sharing a common structure and layout. This allows a group of learners to be trained on the general navigation of the site, but then each learner can choose a topic that they find interesting. While there are site-wide rules and norms (known as “Reddiquette”), the communities that form within each forum often develop their own unique cyberpragmatic norms and practices that can play a role in a user’s ability to successfully participate in that community.

### Procedure

**Step one:** Students watched a five-minute screen-recorded video introduction to the basic features and layout of the Reddit platform, created by the authors of this study. The video training included basic ways of navigating on Reddit (i.e., how to search for subreddit, start a new thread, ask questions, respond to comments), and introduced Reddit-specific cultural information (e.g., understanding the functions and regulation of upvotes and downvotes in the subreddit culture).

**Step two:** With this background information, the instructor then introduced the use of Reddit in a face-to-face learner training session. With scaffolded tasks and guidance from the instructor, students explored different forums and conducted a brief genre analysis in which they examined five to ten popular threads within a topic of their choice, making observations about the purpose, types of comments, and intended audience. As a group, participants discussed different features of what they read, including users' style and tone of writing, length of the comments, and what types of comments resulted in upvotes or downvotes. They then created their own anonymous account. Participants were informed of the procedure of the study and that by agreeing to participate, they allowed the researchers to collect their responses from the questionnaire, individual interviews, and public comments and interactions on Reddit each week.

**Step three:** In order to develop learner autonomy and motivation, participants selected a topic and forum that interested them for the main task. Students read online discussion threads within the online affinity spaces they selected (e.g., fashion industries, photography, films, television, NBA) and were required to post one comment within a discussion thread the first week. They then were required to post three comments each week for another five weeks, with a total number 190 Reddit postings throughout the six-week project across all participants.

**Step four:** Each week, participants took screenshots of their posts from the previous week and submitted them on a learning management system, to show that they had revisited their posts to prepare for in-class discussion. The class had small group discussions about what they had read and posted from the previous week, reflecting on the interactions within the posts (e.g., target language use, social discourse, response from other members of the online community, barriers, and strategies).

**Step five:** Researchers analyzed each comment one week after it was posted to record the number of points and responses it received and perform discourse analysis on the topic of the comment, the type of comment, and any responses.

**Step six:** After six weeks of online postings, participants responded to a post-task reflection questionnaire about their thoughts on the social media literacy training model and their experiences of participating within the Reddit platform.

**Step seven:** Follow-up interviews were conducted to better understand learners' perspectives on their process of conveying and understanding meaning in specific interactions.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over a three-month period by applying a multi-methods approach. First, the main task (posting online) was analyzed using social

media engagement metrics, including the number of points per post, number of responses per post, and number of respondents per participant. These metrics typically used in online marketing were intended to measure the quantity and quality of online interaction generated. Participants completed a Likert scale post-task questionnaire and open-ended questions that investigated their perceptions and attitudes toward the language and communities they encountered. The researchers then selected participants whose posts contained rich content and interactions with other users for an individual follow-up interview to get their perspectives on issues and challenges in ILP and cyberpragmatics.

Participants' comments within Reddit threads were then analyzed through discourse analysis to examine the topics they chose to discuss, the types of comments they posted, and the types of responses they received (see Table 1). Discourse analysis was performed to investigate language used for showing interest and engagement, expressing agreement/disagreement, and preventing conflicts. These interactions were analyzed because of the potential contribution to understanding the development of pragmatic competence (Koike, 1989).

Finally, thematic content analysis was performed on participants' interview and questionnaire data. The data were first coded deductively according to major themes of (1) observation, (2) analysis, and (3) participation (Sykes, 2017; Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008), and then further coded inductively using situation and activity coding strategies (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The situation codes were assigned to units of data that describe how the participants defined and perceived the post-task questions and interview questions. Situation coding refers to a coding system that categorizes themes based on different situations and contexts (Ellgring & Bänninger-Huber, 1986).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Engaging in Discussion in Online Affinity Spaces**

To investigate the first research question (the extent to which language learners are able to engage in discussion in online affinity spaces), social media engagement metrics were first used to analyze the quantity and quality of participation. The two main engagement metrics were the number of points each post received (upvotes or downvotes intended to signal whether a post contributes to the discussion) and the number of responses a post received from other users. Positive numbers of those metrics would indicate that participants were able to contribute to the discussion in ways that other users found valuable to the discussion, while negative points or no responses would signal

that their contribution was not valued (or not noticed) by other members of the community. The mean for number of points and number of responses per comment for our participants was 1.49 and 0.19, respectively. These are both quite low, considering that the most successful comments can get thousands of each. Fifty-five of the 190 postings (28.80%) received at least one upvote, while only 25 (13.09%) received at least one response. While it is difficult to compare these rates with other users, due to the extremely large number of users (including bots) and the variety of subreddits, these data indicate that from a quantitative perspective participants in this study appear to have had a low success rate in participating in these communities. This is not surprising for newcomers or peripheral participants who are experimenting in new online environments, unfamiliar with the pragmatic norms and expectations, and a more longitudinal study might be able to show how new users' participation changes over a longer period of time.

While the engagement metrics were low, the qualitative data from the discourse analysis (see Table 1) show the range of interaction in which participants engaged. Participants attempted to contribute to discussions with a range of comment types across a wide range of topics that reflect the diverse interests within a classroom. After applying discourse analysis to identify types of interaction, researchers categorized the interaction into positive and negative responses. While most comments did not receive a response, those that did tended to represent positive interactions (21 positive interactions and three negative interactions, with minor disagreements deemed positive interactions as long as they were constructive and not insulting, rude, or demeaning). This shows that fears due to inadequate language proficiency or trolls and other bad actors online may be disproportionate with how often they actually occur, with only three out of 190 comments leading to negative replies that were overtly combative or rude.

In sum, these qualitative data show the various interactional practices learners used to experiment within these new environments. They illustrate Gee's (2004) description of online affinity spaces by showing the wide range of spaces chosen by participants where community membership is based on shared interests and where there are routes to participation regardless of experience within the community, allowing opportunities for experimentation.

### **Trajectory of Participatory Development**

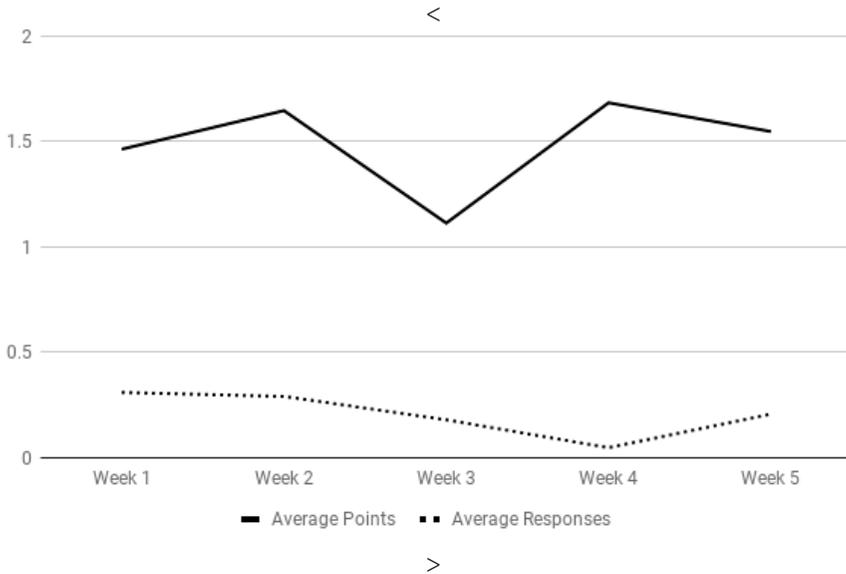
During the course of this six-week project, participants experienced iterative cycles of observing conversations, exploring social interactions in different contexts, and participating and engaging in the conversation as newcomers to a community. Participants entered the same subreddit for each session.

**Table 1**  
Topics, Comments, and Responses

Topics	animal protection, ask Reddit (crowdsourced questions), China issues, eating healthy and cheap, history, Korean pop, LGBTQ, makeup tips, movies, NBA, online gaming, psychology, soccer, television, travel, World of Warcraft
Types of comments	advocate, analyze, answer question, ask question, clarification, compliment, console, critique, discuss popular culture, draw from own culture or background, explain, give advice, give instructions, share experience or story, share opinion, start discussion about news story
Types of positive responses	agreement, answer question, constructive debate or disagreement, compliment, correction or clarification, explanation, express appreciation, express interest, give advice
Types of negative responses	harsh or rude critique, debate, disagreement; insult

Since different subreddits contain unique cultural norms and rules of pragmatic behaviors, participating within one subreddit allows participants to understand their own subreddit community and ways users interact with one another. This study used the number of points and responses each comment received to investigate whether learners' attempts at participation became more successful within the community, similar to analysis of Facebook "likes" in social media marketing (Brettel, Reich, Gavilanes, & Flatten, 2015; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013), as a way of measuring how relevant other users found the learners' contributions. The results revealed evidence of U-shaped curves throughout the process of their participation (see Figure 1). Between Weeks 2 and 3 the average points per comment dropped from 1.64 down to lower than 1.11, while between Weeks 3 and 4 it increased to 1.68 points per comment.

A similar pattern showed in the findings of average responses per comment, though it was lower than average points over time. At Week 4 the response rate dipped to a low 0.05 but quickly increased to 0.20, which represents a drop from 0.31 in Week 1. These results show that participants did not have more interaction with more experience. The U-shaped curves may be the result of experimentation within a new environment and indicative that newcomers



**Figure 1.** Trajectory of the U-shaped participatory development.

need more than the limited participation in a six-week project to navigate the complex cyberpragmatics of an online community.

Participants' awareness of the importance of writing effective posts following the pragmatic norms of the community was evident in their answers to the interviews. As one participant stated:

I had some upvotes my first week and I want to appeal more people to read my post so I started to observe what other users do to get high points. A lot of them are very humorous but I don't think they give very detailed comments like me. I tried to be funny in my second-week posts. I got low points and I don't know why! Maybe they don't get my humor?

When this participant was asked what he did later in the process, he stated "I decided just write something useful and something I know a lot about instead of trying to be funny. Maybe my sense of humor is not that funny here?" This illustrates ways in which a participant changed his behavior based on observations and analysis within the online community. He did not succeed at his attempt to use humor (i.e., the dip in the U-shaped curve), but he did refine his strategies for more successful participation (the rise in the curve). In the follow-up interviews, it was also clear that learners were aware of the type of writing that occurs in this platform and how it differs from formal writing:

I tried to write a lot about the historical issue like writing an essay ... a whole A4 page on my subreddit. But I only get two upvotes! I think you don't need to write a lot but you need to write "smart."

Yea, it is important to provide useful information or understand what other users want to know. They don't have patience to read my long comments so I need to get to the point and write something that is useful for them. The hardest part is to know what other people want or what is important to them. It takes time to figure it out.

The discussion showed that over time, participants started to pay more attention to the social context and produce their comments based on not only the questions or topics from the thread but considering other users' reactions during the social interactions and conversation. These responses also illustrate that participants struggle to adjust to a new set of pragmatic expectations, from the formality of academic contexts to the fluidity of online environments.

### **Online Affinity Spaces as Opportunities for Developing ILP**

Table 2 presents the results of the deductive and inductive coding of interview and questionnaire data. Within each theme we categorized emerging patterns as either positive, negative, or mixed, based on our interpretation of the effect it had on the potential for the development of ILP. Since developing pragmatic awareness requires an iterative cycle where participation leads to renewed observation and analysis (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008), we classified "observation" as comments where participants observe and analyze the language and behavior of *other users* within these spaces, and differentiate "analysis" as comments where participants reflect on *their own* participation: what worked, what did not, and why, as well as strategies for participation in the future. Therefore, we present results in the order of observation first, then participation, then analysis.

#### **Observation**

In the interview and questionnaire data, participants made numerous observations about the language and behaviors they encountered that could help later inform their own participation. Some participants were able to notice factors that resulted in successful comments, such as being concise, humorous, and relevant to the discussion. Viewed through the CoP framework, participants served as outsiders who were able to learn what contributes to successful participation within a given community by observing other participants. Participants also noted that having access to such a large volume of authentic language from a variety of users was beneficial to them, especially on topics that they find interesting. As Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan (2003) note, this

**Table 2**  
Coding of Interview and Questionnaire Data Results

	<b>Observation</b>
Positive	noticed factors of successful/unsuccessful comments (6); beneficial exposure to target language input they find meaningful from a wide range of people (4); noticed differences between own culture and online community (1)
Mixed	difficulty of language used (9); need for cultural/background knowledge (3); potential for conflict (1)
	<b>Participation</b>
Positive	developed better communication skills through practice (7); contributed their knowledge to a discussion (5); interacted with diverse population who shares interest (5); positive impact of getting responses (3); shared interest gave them something to talk about (3); expressed thoughts without worrying (2); put in a lot of thought about how to participate (2); can have more open conversation than in home country (1)
Mixed	failed attempts at humor (1)
Negative	lack of interaction had a negative impact (4); felt forced to post comments artificially (2); did not see it as a valuable way to use target language (2); limited language abilities had a negative impact (1); negative responses led to decreased motivation to participate (1)
	<b>Analysis</b>
Positive	gained confidence by seeing what they can contribute to the discussion (7); identified strategies to overcome challenges in the future (3); put a lot of thought into thinking about what to say, how to say it (2); identified how they misunderstood something (1); adjusted their behavior based on lack of interaction (1); saw a difficult interaction as feedback/learning opportunity (1)
Mixed	identified challenges due to language (1); identified strategies to overcome cultural differences (1); saw the importance of choosing a topic they felt comfortable/knowledgeable discussing (1)
Negative	felt unable to participate due to cultural differences, lack of shared sense of humor (1)

Numbers between parenthesis represent instances present in the data

access to input is essential for developing pragmatic awareness, and the fact that it is based on their interests builds intrinsic motivation (Brown, 2007), making students more likely to self-access outside of class assignments.

Other common factors participants observed in these online spaces were the difficulty and unfamiliarity of the informal language used, as well as the importance of relevant background knowledge. In the words of one participant, “The threads are mostly about American culture so it is difficult to understand sometimes. I need more references, background information, and sometimes do additional research on the thread topics.” We classify these factors as having a mixed impact on participants’ development of ILP because while they are valuable observations about the community, they could also have a de-motivating effect if language learners feel they do not have the linguistic or cultural knowledge necessary to make meaning and contribute successfully. One goal of using online affinity spaces is that students will be more likely to have relevant background knowledge within the affinity spaces they choose, but these results show that this is not always the case.

### Participation

Several common themes emerged regarding ways participation in these spaces could have a positive impact on ILP. Some participants reported that even over the relatively limited duration of the project (six weeks of posting online), they were able to see improvement in their ability to communicate. Since pragmatic awareness requires an iterative, ongoing cycle of exposure and interaction, one goal of this study was to implement tasks similar to Thorne and Reinhardt’s (2008) bridging activities in the hope that learners would find intrinsic value in their participation and therefore continue to participate outside of class. The numerous positive effects listed in Table 2 indicate some ways that participants did find this task intrinsically motivating.

The most common factor that determined whether participation appeared to have a positive or negative effect was receiving responses. Participants who did not receive responses appeared to have decreased motivation and, as stated above, only 13.09% of posts received responses. This low response rate (and resulting de-motivation) may have been due to the relatively short timeline of the project, and the weak integration of formal, scaffolded analysis tasks. These issues are further discussed in the limitations section. Some participants simply did not see this as a valuable way to practice using the target language, preferring instead to use their first language online and focus on face-to-face communication in the target language. These students did not see enough value to justify investing the time, exposure, and practice needed to increase their pragmatic development in such spaces, preferring instead environments they are more familiar with.

### Analysis

As stated above, we specify analysis in this coding schema as reflections occurring in the second (or further) iteration of the cycle, where participants demonstrate analysis of their own participation within the online community. This noticing and awareness of pragmatic features in their interactions represents an important early stage of interlanguage pragmatic development (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Schmidt, 1993). The results in Table 2 present the varied ways participants reflected on the effects of their successes and failures. Participants discussed the positive effects of contributing to the discussion on a topic they felt knowledgeable about, with one participant stating, “I think the more I interact in this subreddit, the more I think I have a lot of knowledge that I can share with other users.” This supports Gee’s (2004) description of multiple routes to participation and the encouragement of dispersed, tacit knowledge (rather than knowledge centralized within a group of insiders). Multiple patterns emerged around the central theme of analyzing what worked well (or did not work) within the community. One example occurred when a participant realized his contribution to the discussion was in fact incorrect, and later said, “I noticed that due to my lack of knowledge about that topic, my input showed some stereotypes and biased statements that offended other users.” This participant showed how experimentation within the space led to a better understanding of the norms and expectations of community members. Another user had a particularly difficult exchange regarding vegetarianism and animal rights, attempting to show a nuanced understanding of both sides of the issue but learning how delicate discussion can be among communities with very passionate members. While clearly angered by the response from other users, this participant was still able to identify ways to adjust future participation, continuing the iterative cycle of observation, participation, and analysis.

### Implications, Limitations and Future Studies

Several implications for ILP and cyberpragmatics can be drawn from these results. Although the social media engagement metrics indicated low points and responses for each comment on average, the discourse analysis on comments and replies within Reddit shows the rich ways that learners experimented with participation in these target language communities on a wide range of topics. As a pedagogic suggestion, instructors can help learners understand the iterative cycle required of developing increased participation (both in quality and quantity) in new environments. Instructors can also encourage students to see these areas as spaces for experimentation, where they have the freedom to become active agents in sharing their stories, giving advice, providing useful information, applying critical thinking skills, making connections with other

users, and respectfully challenging different opinions. These implications could foster more meaningful interaction in their learning experiences.

Participants' interview and questionnaire data illustrate the many ways online affinity spaces provide opportunities for observation, analysis, and participation, though these did not always appear to have a clear impact on learners' ILP development. This may be a result of the main limitation of this study: moving into the participation stage relatively quickly, at the expense of more scaffolded observation and analysis. The observation stage of building pragmatic awareness within this study was rather short, with only an in-class genre analysis (and minimal training in how that should be conducted). There was continued in-class analysis and discussion throughout the six weeks, but students would have likely benefited from more formal training and observation before beginning participation. Also, more formal, scaffolded observation and analysis tasks (rather than relatively informal in-class discussion) would have provided more data to analyze in terms of the development of ILP, rather than relying on interview and questionnaire data collected at the end of the project. However, the limited formal training in pragmatic issues, observation, and analysis was in part due to time constraints but was also a conscious choice in an effort to foster intrinsic motivation and positive views of the platform, in hopes that learners would continue participation outside of class assignments. Future studies can improve this balance between formal training in observation and analysis on the one hand and motivation on the other. Another limitation is that developing a strong understanding of the cyperpragmatics of complex environments like online communities likely requires more than the limited six weeks in this study; a longitudinal study would provide a more complete trajectory of students' development in ILP and more data explaining how they use the strategies they learned from peers to overcome the barriers. Gonzales (2013) states that more studies collecting longitudinal and naturalistic data to investigate ILP development are needed. Longitudinal studies could contribute to the existing literature in ILP by monitoring individual growth and development, analyzing changes over time at the micro-level, and showing how changing "properties of individuals fit into systematic change" (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p.77).

Another implication of this study for further research is the need to question who decides whether participation is "successful" in these spaces. Engagement metrics in the form of responses, upvotes, and "likes" are one form of data, and they are likely to affect students' motivation and confidence throughout different stages of the project. However, the results of this study showed a disconnect between those measurements (which would suggest poor participation) and the qualitative data (which suggest rich, varied, and valuable participation). Learners should be made aware that their goals are

at least equally as important in determining whether their participation was successful or not, and that sharing their own experiences and opinions is more valuable than likes or upvotes.

This study illustrates ways in which affinity spaces can provide valuable opportunities for language learners to participate and experiment within online communities, but it also raises questions about the “outsider–insider” dichotomy within the communities of practice framework, instead illustrating Gee’s (2004) work on online affinity spaces. Rather than having an idealized, prototypical insider as the gold standard (similar to that of the native speaker), there are many different forms of participation within these fluid communities. Instead of outsiders and insiders, participation within these communities can be viewed as falling somewhere on a spectrum from successful to unsuccessful. In this way even newcomers can participate in successful ways, but the more familiar they are with the cyberpragmatic norms and practices within those communities, the more successful they are likely to be—however that success is measured.

## References

- Almon, C. (2014). College persistence and engagement in light of a mature English language learner (ELL) student’s voice. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 39, 461–472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2013.850757>
- Bardovi-Harlig, K., & Mahan-Taylor, R. (2003). Introduction to teaching pragmatics. *English Teaching Forum*, 41(3), 37–39.
- Blattner, G., & Fiori, M. (2011). Virtual social network communities: An investigation of language learners’ development of sociopragmatic awareness and multiliteracy skills. *CALICO Journal*, 29, 24–43. <https://doi.org/10.11139/cj.29.1.24-43>
- Brettel, M., Reich, J. C., Gavilanes, J. M., & Flatten, T. C. (2015). What drives advertising success on Facebook? An advertising-effectiveness model: Measuring the effects on sales of “likes” and other social-network stimuli. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 55, 162–175. <https://doi.org/10.2501/JAR-55-2-162-175>
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.
- Choi, D., Han, J., Chung, T., Ahn, Y. Y., Chun, B. G., & Kwon, T. T. (2015). Characterizing conversation patterns in Reddit: From the perspectives of content properties and user participation behaviors. In *Proceedings of the 2015 ACM conference on online social networks* (pp. 233–243). New York, NY: ACM Press. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2817946.2817959>
- Dörnyei, Z., Csizér, K., & Németh, N. (2006). *Motivation, language attitudes and globalisation: A Hungarian perspective*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853598876>
- Ellgring, H., & Bänninger-Huber, E. (1986). The coding of reported emotional experiences: Antecedents and reactions. In K. R. Scherer, H. G. Wallbott, & A. B. Summerfield (Eds.), *Experiencing emotion: A cross-cultural study* (pp. 39–49). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

- Fraser, M., & Dutta, S. (2008). *Throwing sheep in the boardroom: How online social networking will transform your life, work and world*. London, England: Wiley.
- Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gonzales, A. (2013). Development of politeness strategies in participatory online environments: A case study. In N. Taguchi & J. M. Sykes (Eds.), *Technology in interlanguage pragmatics research and teaching* (pp. 101–120). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/llt.36.06gon>
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Kabilan, M., Ahmad, N., & Abidin, M. (2010). Facebook: An online environment for learning of English in institutions of higher education? *Internet & Higher Education*, 13, 179–187. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2010.07.003>
- Kasper, G., & Rose, K. (2002). *Pragmatic development in a second language*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Kasper, G., & Schmidt, R. (1996). Developmental issues in interlanguage pragmatics. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 18, 149–169. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263100014868>
- Koike, D. A. (1989). Pragmatic competence and adult L2 acquisition: Speech acts in interlanguage. *The Modern Language Journal*, 73, 279–289. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1989.tb06364.x>
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355>
- Lim, W. H., Carman, M. J., & Wong, S. M. J. (2017). Estimating relative user expertise for content quality prediction on Reddit. In *Proceedings of the 28th ACM conference on hypertext and social media* (pp. 55–64). New York, NY: ACM Press. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3078714.3078720>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Moore, C., & Chuang, L. (2017). Redditors revealed: Motivational factors of the Reddit community. In *Proceedings of the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*. Waikoloa Village, Hawaii: IEEE. <https://doi.org/10.24251/HICSS.2017.279>
- Morita, N. (2004). Negotiating participation and identity in second language academic communities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38, 573–603. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588281>
- Núñez, A., Rios-Aguilar, C., Kanno, Y., & Flores, S. (2016). English learners and their transition to postsecondary education. In M.B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research*. Basel, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-26829-3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-26829-3_2)
- Reinhardt, J., & Zander, V. (2011). Social networking in an intensive English program classroom: A language socialization perspective. *CALICO Journal*, 28, 326–344. <https://doi.org/10.11139/cj.28.2.326-344>
- Sauro, S. (2017). Online fan practices and CALL. *CALICO Journal*, 34, 131–146. <https://doi.org/10.1558/cj.33077>
- Schmidt, R. (1993). Consciousness, learning and interlanguage pragmatics. In G. Kasper & S. Blum-Kulka (Eds.), *Interlanguage pragmatics* (pp. 21–42). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Stieglitz, S., & Dang-Xuan, L. (2013). Social media and political communication: A social media analytics framework. *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 3, 1277–1291. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-012-0079-3>

- Stoddard, G. (2015). Popularity and quality in social news aggregators: A study of Reddit and hacker news. In *WWW '15 companion: Proceedings of the 24th international conference on World Wide Web* (pp. 815–818). New York, NY: ACM Press. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2740908.2742470>
- Sykes, J. (2017). Technologies for teaching and learning intercultural competence and interlanguage pragmatics. In C. Chapelle & S. Sauro (Eds.), *The handbook of technology and second language teaching and learning* (pp. 119–133). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118914069.ch9>
- Sykes, J. (2018). Interlanguage pragmatics, curricular innovation, and digital technologies. *CALICO Journal*, 35, 120–141. <https://doi.org/10.1558/cj.36175>
- Sykes, J. (2019). Emergent digital discourses: What can we learn from hashtags and digital games to expand learners' second language repertoire? *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 39, 128–145. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190519000138>
- Thorne, S. L., Black, R. W., & Sykes, J. (2009). Second language use, socialization, and learning in Internet interest communities and online games. *Modern Language Journal*, 93, 802–821. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2009.00974.x>
- Thorne, S. L., & Reinhardt, J. (2008). Bridging activities, new media literacies, and advanced foreign language proficiency. *CALICO Journal*, 25, 558–572. <https://doi.org/10.1558/cj.v25i3.558-572>
- Thorne, S. L., Sauro, S., & Smith, B. (2015). Technologies, identities, and expressive activity. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 215–233. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190514000257>
- Vossen, G., & Hagemann, S. (2007). *Unleashing Web 2.0: From concepts to creativity*. Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufmann. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1345073.1331942>
- Warschauer, M. (2004). Technological change and the future of CALL. In S. Fotos & C. Browne (Eds.), *New perspectives on CALL for second language classrooms* (pp. 15–26). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Weninger, T., Zhu, X. A., & Han, J. (2013). An exploration of discussion threads in social news sites: A case study of the Reddit community. In *ASONAM'13: Proceedings of the 5th international conference on advances in social networks analysis and mining* (pp. 579–583). New York, NY: ACM Press. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2492517.2492646>
- Yus, F. (2001). *Ciberpragmática: El uso del lenguaje en internet*. Barcelona, Spain: Ariel.
- Yus, F. (2011). *Cyberpragmatics: Internet-mediated communication in context*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.213>