

# *Social Networking in an Intensive English Program Classroom: A Language Socialization Perspective*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This ongoing project seeks to investigate the impact, inside and outside of class, of instruction focused on developing learner awareness of social-networking site (SNS) use in an American Intensive English Program (IEP). With language socialization as an interpretative framework (Duff, in press; Ochs, 1988; Watson-Gegeo, 2004), the project uses a variety of qualitative and quantitative classroom research techniques to follow cohorts of intermediate-level students during instruction and by tracing their SNS use over time (e.g. Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). Informed by a bridging-activities model (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008) and situated-learning principles (Gee, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991), the instruction was designed to develop experiential and critical awareness of SNS practices as a means to learn English in the IEP community. Results from the pilot implementation reported here show that SNS awareness instruction can promote, and align with, discourses that affirm English-as-an-international-language values (Sharifian, 2009) and also promote learner-learner interaction and the development of transcultural, plurilingual identities. However, it was also found that learners may resist educational use of an SNS when it conflicts with home discourses that value more utilitarian, traditional forms of instruction.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Four hundred million people,<sup>1</sup> approximately 6% of the planet, are active users of Facebook, the most popular of social-networking sites (SNSs). The average user spends 55 minutes a day on the site (Facebook, 2010), over three times the average time Americans spend daily on their cell phone. Noting this ubiquity, researchers in fields across the social sciences, the humanities, and education have undertaken analyses of SNS use from a variety of perspectives (for an overview, see boyd & Ellison, 2007); for example, as a set of new media literacy practices that affords (Gibson, 1979; van Lier, 2000) the development of new identities (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008; Thorne & Black, 2007). Because Facebook is available in 70 languages, and 70% of its users are outside of the United States (Facebook, 2010), applied linguists and L2 educators have noted that social networking holds great potential for L2 pedagogy (e.g., Blattner & Fiori, 2009; McBride, 2009; Stevenson & Liu, 2010). Further, the fact that SNS use is an authentic and everyday literacy practice for millions of people warrants its inclusion in L2 curricula (McBride, 2009; Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008).

Thorne, Black, and Sykes (2009) comment that L2 classrooms are often isolated from contexts and opportunities "for committed, consequential, and longer term communicative engagement afforded by new technologies" (p. 804). While this may hold true for some foreign language classrooms, we have observed that in formal second language (L2) learner communities like intensive English programs (IEPs), informal use of SNSs outside of the classroom is growing as students make social bonds that they seek to build and maintain over time and distance. SNSs like Facebook are one of the semiotic resources that IEP students "have avail-

able for the construction of desired social identities” (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, p. 804) in, what is for them, study or sojourn abroad contexts. Considering the ideologies of English use in IEP discourses, the transcultural, plurilingual nature of IEP student literacy practices, and the multifarious, complex forms of technology-mediated activity practiced by all those involved, we propose that language socialization perspectives and research frameworks (e.g., Duff, 2008; Ochs, 1988; Watson-Gegeo, 2004) applied to SNS use in contexts like IEPs can provide valuable insights for teaching and research in technology-mediated L2 learning environments.

Since a language socialization perspective views L2 learning as inextricable from socialization and enculturation processes, it provides a useful research framework for investigating SNS use as a new media means of socialization into new literacy practices, identities, and communities or affinity groups (e.g. Black, 2007, 2008, 2009; Lam, 2000, 2004, 2009). SNSs like Facebook combine features of various internet-based social media and communication technologies (e.g., chat, email, message boards, and blogging) and miniapplications (e.g., quizzes and social gaming) into a single, customizable interface. With this suite of tools, users can develop, maintain, strengthen—and damage—social bonds and affiliations, both real and virtual, by friending (and de-friending) each other, posting on friends’ “walls,” sharing links and photos, joining groups, and playing games together. Insofar as SNS activities may be shared by communities of individuals, they can be considered social practices (Scribner & Cole as cited in Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). It follows, then, that SNS use might afford the development of new practices within communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; see also Roth & Lee, 2006; Thorne, 2009), as well as provide access to new practices and affiliations. To the extent that these practices are linguistically and symbolically mediated, they can be understood as literacy practices and, therefore, vehicles for language socialization (Ochs, 1988) and, if in additional languages, for L2 socialization. While L2 socialization frameworks have been applied to L2 learning in formal instructed contexts (Cole & Zuengler, 2003; Duff, 1996) and to self-directed technology-mediated L2 learning and use (e.g., Black and Lam), there has been little research from this perspective on technology-mediated L2 learning in formal instructed contexts (but see Ware, 2008).

Informed by these insights, we initiated a long-term, instructional research project to investigate the impact of focused instruction on SNS use, in and out of class, at an adult Intensive English program (IEP) at a large public American university. Informed by a *bridging-activities* model (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008) and *situated-learning* principles (Gee, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991), the instruction was designed to develop awareness of SNS literacy practices as a means for learner socialization and community practice in English. The instruction was implemented in an intermediate-level speaking-listening-reading course<sup>2</sup> in several 8-week sessions (IEP semesters) with multiple cohorts of learners. As instructional research, analysis of each implementation of the instruction is meant to inform subsequent implementations. This paper reports on the pilot implementation of the project.

As a theoretical framework for data analysis and interpretation, we adopt an L2 socialization perspective (Duff, in press; Watson-Gegeo, 2004) and employ classroom research methods involving documentation of learner coursework, audiorecordings of classroom interactions, observation of participants by the instructor (second author) and researcher (first author), and postinstructional learner interviews. An important, long-term aspect of the project, still going on at the time of this writing, also involves observation of some learners’ SNS use over a year to document change in SNS and L2 literacy practices. With the understanding that an SNS profile archives how users self-present, socially interact, and affiliate in groups (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008), we will be able to use the classroom data in conjunction with observation of learner SNS use before, during, and after the implementation of the instruction.

We recognize that learner L2 socialization at a diverse American IEP like ours occurs through participation in multiple transcultural and plurilingual discourses (Gee, 1996), including institutional discourses, classroom discourses, informal 'backstage' discourses (Goffman, 1959; Sarangi & Roberts, 1999; Vaughan, 2007), and home discourses. Gee relates literacy to discourses by recognizing that literacies are part of a set of practices, or discourses, that "enact the cultural norms of a particular social group and the identity of the individual within that group" (Lam, 2004, p. 46). While instruction does not directly result in changed literacy practices according to this view, we maintain that classroom-based activity, as one of many institutional discourses (albeit a privileged one), is a practice in which educators have substantial agency. Our research question therefore asks how these multiple discourses enact student identities both on- and off-line, and how these discourse-enacted identities interact with our instructional practices. In other words, we want to know how what our students do in SNSs outside the classroom influences, and is influenced by, what we do with them and with SNSs inside the classroom.

## **BACKGROUND**

As background for the project, we first survey L2 socialization research, especially classroom-based and technology-mediated research, with emphasis on the methodologies entailed by the approach. We follow with a brief review of research on social networking in general and in L2 pedagogy.

### ***L2 Socialization***

With its roots in ethnography, language socialization is an approach to understanding human sociocultural activity that acknowledges language learning and enculturation as interrelated and inseparable processes (Garrett & Baquédano-Lopez, 2002; Ochs, 1988; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). In this view, linguistic and cultural knowledge are co-constructed through each other, a process that is mediated by linguistic and other symbolic activity. Garrett & Baquédano-Lopez describe socialization as a set of processes "realized to a great extent through the use of language, the primary symbolic medium through which cultural knowledge is communicated and instantiated, negotiated and contested, reproduced and transformed" (p. 339). Language use is thus both the means and end of the socialization process (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984).

L2 socialization acknowledges that additional languages, codes, or varieties are also learned through socialization (Duff, in press; Watson-Gegeo, 2004; Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen, 2003). Duff (in press) describes L2 socialization as the processes involved when L2 learners "seek competence in the language and, typically, membership and the ability to participate in the practices of communities in which that language is spoken" (p. 2), although they "may not experience the same degrees of access, acceptance, or accommodation" (Duff, 2007, p. 310) in the new communities as normally experienced in L1 socialization. In contrast to psychocognitive perspectives on SLA in which cognition is understood to be primarily psychological, L2 socialization reflects a sociocognitive perspective on L2 learning (Atkinson, 2002; Hill, 2006; Zuengler & Miller, 2006) in which the locus of cognition is in social activity and language learning is not conceptualized separately from language use (Larsen-Freeman, 2007). Sociocognitive paradigms challenge the epistemologies and metaphors resulting from mind-body dualistic thinking, for example, that knowledge is an object or learning is reception. L2 socialization is also coherent with a sociocultural (cultural-historical) framework (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006;

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