Book Reviews

Online Communication in a Second Language: Social Interaction, Language Use and Learning Japanese

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The reviewed book aims at examining the processes of undirected language use in computer-mediated communication (CMC) settings. Rather than focusing on CMC interactions in tasks designed, monitored and assessed by teachers and integrated with the regular language learning curriculum, Pasfield-Neofitou decided to investigate unrestricted, unguided, free communication between users of the same language, Japanese, in this case. The researcher's purpose was to observe and analyse "natural" communication, one that is not triggered or stimulated in any way by the teacher, the coursebook or the classroom assignment. It was also interesting to see how natural CMC interaction evolves and in what social settings.

Another interesting issue is how learners autonomously select CMC modes, given a great variety of dimensions CMC actually encompasses (e.g., synchronous vs. asynchronous, text vs. audio vs. video), and whether there is any correlation between the implementation of particular CMC environments and the languages that are used within these. As the author herself writes in

the introduction, "the volume serves to challenge traditional categorizations of 'synchronous' and 'asynchronous' CMC mediums, assumptions about the 'placelessness' of online domains, and previous characterizations of online conversations as 'haphazard' and 'unstructured'" (p. 1)

On top of all that, the process of learning Japanese is examined, in order to see how learners were using CMC in their L2 and how this communication provided opportunities for language acquisition. This area is particularly worth exploring due to the considerable differences between English and Japanese, mainly in terms of script, and the ways of handling the issue of script shift in different ways in a computer format.

The particular research questions posed by Pasfield-Neofitou were as follows:

1. How do learners establish and maintain relationships in which they use a second language online?
2. What is the nature of learners' CMC and in what combinations are they using CMC in their second language?
3. How does the use of CMC in conjunction with other resources provide opportunities for second language acquisition?

It is the aim of the present review to assess whether and to what extent the author has actually managed to accomplish the formidable task she set herself, in particular, whether the book offers "an alternate, sophisticated view of CMC interaction which highlights identity, the skilful management of communication, and user agency in interaction with technology" (p. 1), as claimed in the introduction. This was to be accomplished by researching a body of CMC data collected from 12 students studying Japanese at an Australian university and their 18 Japanese contacts who volunteered to communicate via different CMC modes (email, Skype, Mixi blogs/videos/comments/profiles, Facebook messages/wall/albums/apps/profiles, MySpace comments/profiles, World of Warcraft profiles, MSN convesations, phone emails, Ameba blogs/profiles or Mind map data). In total, 777 CMC data files were compiled into a corpus of 2,460 naturally occurring instances of communication collected over the period of three years.

The book is composed of six chapters (with the first being entitled "Introduction" and the last one "Conclusion"), a list of references and an index of names. The key chapters reporting upon different aspects of the study are Chapters 2-5: "Learner backgrounds and online L2 networks," "Social settings of situated CMC use," "Features of CMC use" and "Use of contextual resources and SLA opportunities."

The first chapter, "Introduction," in fact contains not only a statement of aims and purposes of the researcher that are to be realized throughout the book

but also contains the whole theoretical background to the field the author decided to explore. Thus, first of all, it contains a brief literature review reporting upon the findings of previous studies in such areas as the language of CMC (learner output produced in spoken vs. written, synchronous vs. asynchronous modes) and characteristic features of digital writing such as multiple punctuation, eccentric spelling, capitalisation, emoticons, rebus writing or nonlinguistic symbols. In particular, the researcher is trying to draw a distinction between spoken versus written and synchronous versus asynchronous communication, challenging the traditional distinctions of synchronicity by showing, for instance, how contemporary CMC applications blur the line by providing versatile forms of online presence (e.g., synchronous instant messengers allowing sending "offline" messages or hybrid tools like Google Wave and Facebook allowing multiple modes of online communication). The review of literature on the language of CMC continues in the areas of CMC genre selection, the way CMC language output is conceptualized and the extent to which the personalized language output allows one to create a personal internet (rather than the global, everyone's, Internet). Pasfield-Neofitou claims, after Miller and Slater (2000), that L2 language use in CMC settings allows one to construct a personal online domain, a property of the learner, which is evolving given changing patterns in language use or technology preference. This interesting concept is in close parallel to the notion of interlanguage (see, for instance, Selinker, 1972), which emphasizes learner ownership and active authorship of L2 language use. L1 perspectives in terms of development of language proficiency in English and in Japanese are also reviewed, with special attention devoted to the notion of identity: How previous studies report upon the performance/construction of online identity in the individual and group dimensions, instructed CMC L2 use as well as the effect of CMC use on intercultural competence development.

A separate part of the introductory chapter is a detailed presentation of the theoretical framework that Pasfield-Neofitou adopted for her study, namely, the social realist approach (see, for instance, Sealey & Carter, 2004). Social realism makes use of a broad definition of applied linguistics which encompasses not only the teaching and learning of additional languages but also aspects of language in use, thus resulting in an overlap of linguistics and sociolinguistics. In this framework, according to Belz (2002), the empirical world is viewed as highly complex and multifaceted, where social action is shaped by the interplay of macro (structure) and micro (agency) phenomena, which, in methodological terms, results in the view of the social world as stratified, comprising structure, agency, and culture, with language as a cultural emergent property (Sealey & Carter, 2004). In particular, Pasfield-Neofitou presents the stratified social world model, describing the four social domains of situated activity,

psycho-biography, social settings and contextual resources as influences constantly shaping language users' lives, with a complicated network of interrelations between them. The selection of domains as areas for analysis is the backbone of the book, reflected in the titles of the successive chapters.

The final part of the introduction contains a discussion of the methodological framework, the research procedure, sampling, data collection and analysis techniques. In particular, the research relies on ethnographic approaches to data collection, including interviews, qualitative surveys, focus groups, as well as such quantitative measures as calculations of post lengths. Data collected from 12 students of Japanese studying at an Australian university and their 18 volunteer Japanese contacts amounted to 777 CMC data files of different types resulting in 2,460 naturally occurring instances of communication. The researcher had access to archived text-based communication of the participants, which, however, they were allowed to censor if they did not wish the researcher to view material of sensitive or personal nature.

The remaining part of the introduction retells the data analysis framework which Sarah Pasfield-Neofitou uses to draw conclusions about language use and CMC patterns: comparative analysis of interviews and questionnaires, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis backed up by NVivo software and computer-mediated discourse analysis.

The decision to cover all the three crucial areas in a single introductory chapter, namely, the statement of aims for the book, literature review and presentation of research methodology does not seem to be the most fortunate. As a result, some areas of L2 CMC do not get sufficient coverage, especially the effect of instructed CMC on L2 acquisition. Even though this is beyond the major focus of the book, the body of literature is so immense that it could get a slightly more systematic coverage in the chapter. Similarly, given great attention devoted to the social aspects of language development in CMC use, the review of L2 acquisition in telecollaborative CMC settings seems inadequate as well, with only few works of O'Dowd and Belz acknowledged. Finally, greater acknowledgement of previous studies into CMC in tandem settings would have shed better light on how language acquisition patterns observed for Japanese in the work under review refer to the already established body of knowledge.

Chapter 2, entitled "Learner Backgrounds and Online L2 Networks," is an extended description of the participants of this longitudinal study, outlining their self- or psychobiographies with respect to language learning, internet use, and relationships with their Japanese-speaking networks. The accounts are given based on the descriptive coding of participants' attributes from their interview comments and the auto-coding of Japanese email interview responses. Obviously, much greater emphasis is laid on the Australian participants than

their Japanese counterparts, and the former's sociocultural backgrounds are thoroughly covered in the chapter. Pasfield-Neofitou first produces a summary of the learners' linguistic backgrounds indicating languages, trips to Japan, years of Japanese study and the like; then, a similar summary is made of their technological backgrounds (type of computer/operating system, total daily computer use, number of computers used, preferred online applications). In a way, the author produces an account similar to the language passport of the *European Language Portfolio* in the two areas of language use and computer use. A similar summary is made of Japanese contacts, though to a less detailed extent.

What follows is a descriptive account of the learners' biographies, with rich data on their learning context, professional situation, proficiency in Japanese, preferred learning habits, contacts with the Japanese language and culture and the like. Each description is a vivid and in-depth account of one's psychobiography, which makes the next three chapters a truly interesting read. Moreover, thanks to establishing the networks and relationships of CMC use and providing clear data on the nature of the relationships between Australian participants and their Japanese partners (who are, for instance, a former tutor, a friend from a bar, a MySpace friend, a boyfriend or a museum boss), one can fully see and understand the complex nature of foreign language interaction occurring in CMC settings.

The description of participants shows at the same time both stronger and weaker sides of the study. On the one hand, the 12 Australian participants exhibit an immense range of learner profiles as far as age is concerned (ranging from 18 to 28 years of age), additional languages (ranging from 2 to as many as 6), level of proficiency in Japanese (from beginner levels of 1-2 to very advanced levels of 11-12), length of study of Japanese (1-17 years) and length of stay in Japan (from none to as many as 13 months in total). Collecting a rich body of data from participants across such a wide spectrum of sociodemographic and learning variables enabled the researcher to come up with examples of interactions with their corresponding linguistic and technological contexts. On the other hand, the body of data is quite naturally skewed towards the more proficient participants. For instance, out of 777 data samples as many as 294 (more than 37%) were produced by one particularly prolific and proficient participant, while 2 participants out of 12 account for almost 60% of the total number of data samples. Some participants contributed very little to the corpus: Hyacinth, 7 samples (6 blog entries and 1 blog profile); and Noah only 4 (1 blog post, 1 comment, 2 profiles). As a result, it is difficult to make generalisations about the whole group as such; rather, individual cases need to be interpreted in relation to their sociocultural settings.

Chapter 3, "Social Settings of Situated CMC Use," is the first out of the three chapters recounting the results of the empirical work conducted by Sarah Pasfield-Neofitou in her study. More specifically, the author identifies here the ways in which the participants' experiences of sociocultural nature shape CMC use in a variety of computer environments. The three focal issues of management of identity, maintenance of interest, and nonuse/lapsing/lurking are discussed in great detail, with example incidents proving particular points. It turned out that there exist language- or nationality-specific online domains, specific places on the Internet which are characteristic for particular linguistic/cultural communities. The participants in the study, in their substantial part, were shown to actually shape these Japanese-language domains to personalise them. An important part of this chapter is also an attempt at investigating the effect that engagement in CMC interaction with Japanese contacts had on the lives of the Australian participants in a somewhat broader communicative context. Data on, for instance, the increase in the number of Facebook contacts, the ratio of actual "active contacts" to "all contacts" and the number of Japanese-language environments used for everyday purposes, the characteristics of code-switching and medium-switching, all seem to demonstrate that involvement in CMC interaction does exert an effect on the way that learners use computers for work, study and leisure purposes. It is, thus, an important finding of Pasfield-Neofitou's study that the L1-L2 computer use is bi-directional: What we do in digital environments in L2 shapes the way we use computers and the Internet in L1.

Chapter 4, "Features of CMC Use," is presumably the most significant part of the book reporting upon research in second language acquisition. This chapter examines the features of participants' CMC use, focusing on the way in which learners use CMC in their L2, for what purposes and in what combinations. The situated CMC activity is analysed in terms of conversational organisation, language choice, orthography and code-switching and types of language use. As demonstrated with qualitative data, participants' patterns of turn-taking are related to their language choice in terms of orthography and code-switching. Since, as Pasfield-Neofitou proved in Chapter 3, specific online domains are language/culture-specific, language choice analysed in Chapter 4 shows how participants identified particular settings as either English or Japanese in nature. Their language choice was also influenced by interpersonal relationships, interlocutor's status and learner's motivations. Quite interestingly, the analysis in the chapter touches upon the question of whether text-based communication is "talking" or "writing," and challenges the notion of synchronicity of online communication. Participants proved to distinguish between the two modes in terms of degree of synchronicity, based

on use rather than solely on medium choice, and they did not label particular media (such as MSN, MySpace or email) as clearly synchronous or asynchronous. Thus, Sealey and Carter's (2004) view of CMC as emergent from speaking, writing, technology and human behaviour is reinforced through the data from two case studies thoroughly described in the chapter.

Chapter 5, "Use of Contextual Resources and SLA Opportunities," is the last chapter reporting upon empirical work. It strives to examine how participation in online communication provides opportunities for language acquisition. The author draws on analytical coding of the interaction and interview data, reflecting upon such aspects as gaining an audience, facing interactional challenges, patterns of dictionary use and the use of other supplementary resources (paper-based printed resources, non-computer-based digital resources such as Nintendo DS hand-held game system, software-based and Internet-based digital resources). The use of multiple resources proved to be common, with online dictionaries being a popular resource. However, the use of resources appeared to be influenced by participants' psycho-biographies, the social contexts in which communication with their Japanese partners was taking place, as well as the very nature of the situated activity. A major part of Chapter 5, though, is a discussion of how situated CMC activity planned in the study makes affordances for discourse repair, peer editing and feedback giving. Participants were found to use the linguistic capital of their native-speaker partners to obtain feedback, with some, more proficient ones, engaging in peer editing. Repair was rather infrequent and self-correction was more prevalent due to the informal nature of conversations; however, in some cases delayed repair was undertaken even after change of the topic, which testifies to the awareness of learners and their willingness to improve.

The final part of the book draws a conclusion concerning the findings presented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. The research questions posed in the introduction are revisited and the most salient points are extracted from analysis.

To sum up, the book by Sarah E. Pasfield-Neofitou is a highly interesting and comprehensive monograph on the topic of social interaction in CMC settings, based on the particular example of learning Japanese by Australian students. The author makes a number of very important claims about participating in online domains and virtual communities, entering CMC networks and maintaining relationships, code-switching and turn-taking, as well as acquisition opportunities in CMC. The book attempts to cover such a vast area that it would be impossible to exhaust the topic completely. In fact, it should be treated as an invitation to undertake further research, in more controlled settings, with more systematic and principled sampling, not only in order to verify the claims made by Pasfield-Neofitou, but also, perhaps even more importantly,

to see to what extent the observations about the nature of learning Japanese by Australian speakers can be generalisable to foreign language acquisition as such.

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