Social Media, Informal Language Learning, and Knowledge Management. A Case Study

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Médias sociaux, apprentissage informel des langues et gestion des savoirs. Une étude de cas

Résumé : A partir d'un corpus de conversations par chat et de mails échangés entre des étudiants roumains et russes en français langue étrangère, conversations dans lesquelles les étudiants étaient censés présenter une entreprise locale, cet article se donne comme but d'étudier la relation dialogique qui s'établit entre la communication en français – la langue principale de communication, suite aux consignes des enseignants – et l'anglais, en tant que langue préférée par les participants aux échanges. Alors que le français représente la langue utilisée par les étudiants pour parler des sujets imposés par les enseignants, l'anglais est utilisé afin de rendre des éléments plus personnels et, du coup, interrompt de façon presque subversive le discours de l'autorité. Voilà pourquoi nous pouvons analyser, d'une part, le contexte déterminé par les contraintes imposées par un sujet prédéterminé et, de l'autre part, l'apparition d'un deuxième contexte, parallèle au premier, contexte créé afin de s'évader des contraintes. Comme nous pourrons le voir à travers notre analyse, les medias sociaux agissent en tant que facilitateurs pour la construction des deux contextes.

Mots-clés : chat, apprentissage informel, multilinguisme, pouvoir, medias sociaux

Abstract: Based on a corpus of conversations taken from the chat as well as e-mails exchanged between Romanian and Russian students in French as a foreign language – undergraduate level – conversations on how to devise the presentation of a local company, my paper aims at studying the dialogic relationship between the discourse in French – the master language used by the participants at their teachers' recommendation – and English as preferred language. While French represents the language used by the students to talk about the topic set by their teachers, English is used for rendering more intimate thoughts and seems to disrupt and thus subvert the discourse of authority. So comes that on the one hand, we can analyze one context determined by the constraints imposed by a pre-determined topic and language and on the other hand we witness the production of another, parallel, context created by the need to evade the previous one. As we are going to see, social media act as facilitators for both contexts.

Keywords: chat log, informal learning, multilingualism, power, social media

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Introduction

The present paper is centered on one major research topic which seeks to determine the importance of social media in informal language learning from the perspective of Conversation Analysis. Once the selected corpus investigated, another issue emerges and needs our attention, that rather delicate problem raised by online learning and power relationships. This time the methodological tools employed belong to the field of the cultural studies.

1. Database and methodology

Data from the present study are drawn from the AUF Project *Utilisations du français langue véhiculaire dans les interactions plurilingues en ligne des étudiants non-spécialistes du français* (Usage of French as Lingua Franca in Multilingual Online Interactions between French Non-Specialist Students) developed by a team of researchers working for four universities in Central and Eastern Europe seeking to establish the place of French in the linguistic repertoires of students coming from different geographical, cultural, linguistic backgrounds, but sharing the same area of interest (economics). Each of the four institutions selected 16 students who agreed to communicate online in order to share their experience and knowledge by interacting with peers in a foreign language in the chat rooms on subjects of specialization.

Our research is particularly focused on the production of text chat transcripts and e-mail exchanges between Romanian and Russian learners, who, at the time, were enrolled in the second or third-year of study studying French at 'Ovidius' University of Constanta and State University of Economics and Finance St. Petersburg, respectively. It should be mentioned that participants had studied French in high school for an average of 4 years and were native speakers of either Russian or Romanian.

The Task: Learners were randomly paired, each dyad being asked to discuss in their L2 (French) and being instructed to present a local company. All pairs were given one month (April-May 2012) to complete the collaborative task.

The Results: The chat logs of the 16 (unfamiliar) pairs were collected by the participants themselves, hence no transcription was required by the researchers. Transcripts are consequently reproduced as they appear onscreen apart from any identifying material, and are presented verbatim, including any imperfections subsequent to interaction. Each of these sessions vary in length, from brief nine turn exchanges, due to one of the participants' lack of interest in continuing (Excerpt n1), to lengthier interactions (Excerpt 3).

The corpus which was collected during the project in the form of textual products was issued by the participating students during their dialogues on the web (mail, Skype, Facebook chat). As we are going to see, the Conversation Analysis of the selected excerpts reveals characteristics relevant to multilingual students: the (master) discourse in French becomes interspersed with English and even Russian phrases and even whole sentences. It is particularly this peculiarity that

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made us center our attention on the Ro-Ru networked discourse. This subversion of the (re)commanded patterns leads us to another, related issue concerning the sense of freedom latent in social media users, language learners included.

2. Social media and informal language learning

Generally speaking, 'virtual' community is a term that has existed since the inauguration of online applications. As far as SNS are concerned, however, these online tools support new ways in which such digital communities are formed and new ways in which people can connect with each other. With the birth of SNS we have witnessed a reorganization of the internet geography but we have to take into account that prior to their existence, the internet was referred to in location-based metaphors, e.g. web sites, homepages, site addresses. Nowadays, such metaphors of place have been replaced with personal metaphors, e.g. blogs, profiles, my space, facebook. Another major characteristic is the fact that SNS encourage the democratization of knowledge and information and create the sensation of signing a declaration of independence in people that use them. No longer referred to as 'visitors', they create their own accounts and are allowed to customize and administer their own personal web page, they become 'users'.

Global citizenry that goes together with the sense of freedom is what allures people into creating virtual profiles. The integration of remote communications into the flow of life could have an impact on face-to-face communications while 'always-on communication' could be impoverishing one's ability to be alone and manage and contain one's emotion:

> *A call to a friend is a call to a known (if evolving) relationship. Going online to a social networking site offers a place to dream. For some, these sites foster a sense that old relationships are dispensable. Some users of such sites describe feeling more attached to the site than to any particular acquaintance. In psychodynamic terms, the site becomes a transference object: the place where friendships come from.* (Turkle, 2006 : 6)

It is true to say that frequent visits to SNS, in order to update a profile or respond to messages left by friends, demonstrate some level of addiction. In addition, the fact that people can change their identity or 'upgrade' it by the use of IDs whenever they want can have implications for the way we deal with identity issues today. Having a polymorphous entity online also means that 'identities can be selected or discarded almost at will, as in a game or a fiction'.

If we move back to Turkle's point, it can be said that instantaneous communication creates a new form of dependency, where people need to communicate with others to feel their own feelings. As we can note in the corpus used here, teenagers growing up in this always-on culture are expected to give rapid responses to the messages received, without taking time to process information.

Pedagogical demarches should themselves take advantage of the students' readability to use different types of computer-mediated technologies if we want to improve language learning and teaching methodologies.

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From this point of view, foreign languages can be used and learned in online settings, specifically e-mails and text chat, since they are widely available in institutional as well as private settings and can thus be used as a tool in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. However, some critics highlighted the fact that electronic discourse can pose some problems when language learning is involved: the use of language in e-mails or written chat conversations has the immediacy characteristic of speech end the permanence of writing and it was labeled as 'protean communication' (Murray, 2000 : 397-422).

On the other hand, when balancing the drawbacks and benefits of using Conversation Analysis on networked discourse, Vicenza Tudini points to the fact that although this type of texts lack some kinesic (e.g. gesture, posture, facial expression, proxemics etc.) as well as prosodic features (e.g. accent, stress, volume, pitch, intonation and rhythm), online chat, for example, is a valuable object of study since:

> *The reported pedagogical benefits of online chat can however be attributed to the real-time (synchronous) nature of chat communication which obliges participants to 'think on their feet and co-construct online talk as occurs in face-to-face conversation. The real-time nature of online chat also permits negotiation of meaning, a visible language learning behavior…* (Tudini, 2010 : 1).

As our piece of research attempts to reveal, socializing, building relationships and constructing identities are the main motives why non-native speakers (NNS) use chat rooms. Another reason is the pedagogical one, given that their conversational activity is a course requirement and that they are seeking to learn French (in this case) through interaction.

Warschauer (1996) was one of the researchers who have carried out studies on computer-mediated communication (CMC) and his investigations of networked language learning reported that more equitable learner participation and more opportunities to use more complex language were among the major benefits found in this type of environment.

As a result, no matter if synchronous as it is the case with the text chat or asynchronous as it is the case with blogs, Facebook walls or e-mails, oral or written, CMC has been shown to offer learners a potentially reach environment for language learning, and for French language conversation practice in particular.

In the introductory section it has already been underlined that the corpus selected represents a set of "hybrid' communication patterns, where L2, typically represented by French is dismissed and replaced by English and, occasionally with Russian.

In the excerpt presented below, we have selected two samples removed from the conversation held between student 1 (Ro) and student 2 (Ru) that formed pair no. 6 (for privacy control reasons, henceforth referred to as S1-6 and S2-6): the first sample represents a Facebook dialogue on instant text chat (1.a.), while the second is selected from their e-mail messages.

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Excerpt 1

1.a. Facebook chat

1 S1-6 : Now what?
2 ... Que est-que nous devrions faire maintenant?
3 S2-6: Don't know. We can communicate a little bit, or finish it
4 S1-6 : What should we talk about? the birds and the bees?
5 S2-6: We should not, we may. So we can finish now
6 S1-6 : That was an admirable effort. I bid you farewell noble knight of the french
7 army.
8 S2-6: English is your second language? May be «I bid»? If so, thanks and good
9 buy
10 Oh, I'm late
11 S1-6 : No, English is the language i fell in love with and French is the stepmother.
12 My dramatic exit was ruined
13 Bye
14 Really?
15 S2-6: It was a good try,
16 Bye
17 S1-6 : Why, thank you. You are a true gentleman.

1.b. e-mails

1 S1-6 And of course if the project arrives too late, please excuse me as I descend in the lowest
2 bowels of hell.
3 S2-6 Ne t'inquiète pas de retard, c'est seulement d'aujourd'hui il faut échanger par les
4 presentations des entreprises qo'on a choisi.

Firstly, the chat script can be analyzed for the language-related episodes (LRE) in lines 8 and 16. According to Sawin and Lapkin (1998 : 326), a LRE is defined as "any part of the dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, correct themselves or others. The latter occurs in line 16, when S2-6 having miswritten 'buy' (l9) and noticing S1-6's correct spelling in line 13, performs the repair work in line 16. It is V. Tudini who stresses that:

> *Repair sequences are revealing of language learning processes, as they provide analysts and untrained readers with the opportunity to observe single moments of learning being negotiated by participants. (2010 : 6)*

Another LRE is the instance where S2-6 questions the use of the verb *to bid* by S1-6. In fact, S2-6 is familiar with the definition of this verb used in the field of business—'to offer to pay a particular price for goods, especially in an auction' (http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/bid_2)—when, S1-6 has in mind its literary meaning—'to greet someone' (http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/bid_3).

Secondly, it is interesting to point out the fact that S1-6, the initiator of L2 as English, has a powerful sense of the spectacular in the sense that unconsciously assimilates the text chat to a script and her lines abound in theatrical allusions (see l.6, l.7, l.12, l.17). Moreover, the dramatic dimension is further augmented by the dialogic relationship between the discourse in French –the master language used by the participants at their teachers' recommendation –and English overtly acknowledged as preferred language by S1-6 in line 11.

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The rather brief number of turn exchanges, is due to S2-6's lack of interest in continuing chatting in the L2 that he is not proficient in: after asking S1-6 if English is her L2, he tries to suspend talk (ll. 8-9). But only then is he aware of the fact that this can be interpreted as rude behavior gets an excuse (l10) and declares his satisfaction with a job well-done (l.15). Restart is initiated by L1-6 in l. 14 with no chance of success. Similar characteristics concerning selecting English as L2 and the appetite for the dramatic are to be found in S1-6's e-mailed messages, as well (see Excerpt 1.b). This time, L2-6 chooses to conform to the teacher's requirement which recommended French as conversation tool and refuses to answer in English. Although S2-6 doesn't play according to S1-6 rules, he shows that he covertly understood what S1-6 fears were and his reply has a very reassuring tone…in French.

In the next excerpt, we can see how S1-10's attempt to inculcate English as L2 is rejected by S2-10 from the very first reply although we can infer from it that it is more a matter of conformity than one of not-mastering English well enough as to hold a conversation.

Excerpt 2

1 S1-10 hello.how are you? are you interested in a particular company in romania that
2 you would like to talk about? and..please tell me what are the most important
3 informations that you want to find in this project. I want to start to write and it's
4 important to know what:D

1 S2-10 Salut=) Je suis desolé, mais on interdit de parler anglais. Seulement francais. J'ai deja
2 trouvé l'entreprise pour toi - cet entreprise a propos communication par telephones
3 portable...
4 Est-ce que tu peux trouver l'entreprise qui a la meme activité?

So far, out of the excerpts selected for analysis, three different language usage patterns emerge and these can schematically be rendered by the following formulas:

- L1a(Ro) ≠ L1b (Ru) (available for all the three corpus samples),
- L2=L2 (Engl.) (1.a.),
- L2a(Fr) ≠L2b (Engl) (Excerpts 1.b and 2).

It should be mentioned, nevertheless that the project corpus follows mainly L2= L2 (Fr) and only the exceptions served the purposes of the present study.

The last excerpt selected from the corpus is the lengthier of the three and it corresponds to dyad no. 14, where S1-14 is the Romanian student and S2-14 stands for the Russian participant and is the richest in terms of multilingualism. As prefigured in l.1, English, French and Russian appear as second languages with S1-14, although, throughout their chat discussion, English appears L1-14's preferred language while French seems to be the language L2-14 is more comfortable with.

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Excerpt 3

3.1 e-mail

1 S1-14: Hello, bonjour and privet, Olga ! I'm your correspondent from Romania for the french
2 project which consists of presenting my national company to you and your national
3 company to me, so I'd like to add you on Skype. Please confirm if your skype name is
4 lunenkova1. I hope we'll get along. Dasvidania ! :)

3.2 SKYPE

1 S2-14: hi,dan. That's so cute that u use russian)
2 S2-14: I'll try romanian 2
3 S2-14: Let's put it clear from the very beginning- r we going to use more french in
4 mailing?cause i need then to copy and hand in our mailing
5 S1-14: I don't speak very well russian, even though I was born there. :P We can use
6 whatever language you want, but i'm more comfortable with english to be honest. :)
7 S2-14: ok. We' ll practice both if u don't mind (i'll try to use french basicaly-it wont be
8 complicated at all
9 S2-14: Cause i need to practice it) but u can write as u want
10 S2-14: Do u have any preference in our companies?
11 S1-14 : Pas de preference, mais je pense que pour nous, on sera plus facile de presenter
12 de petites entreprises. Какое у тебя мнение?
13 S2-14: mm, c'est pas mal, comme l'idea. Moi, j'ai pensé - plus grande est une entreprise,
14 plus facile est il pour décrire.
15 S2-14: parce qu'il y a plus d'information sur Internet
16 S2-14: En fait j'ai aucunes préférences. Tu peux donc rechercher telle entreprise que tu
17 veux
18 S2-14: d'acc?
19 S1-14: oh, hello. sorry cause i was out for some days, but i had trouble with my internet
20 connection. anyway, i'm fine with big companies too.
21 S2-14: parfait!
22 S2-14: pas grave. Moi, je suis aussi désolée
23 on peut alors commencer à rechercher.
24 S1-14: i don't remember the schedule, but i think we should finish it in early may
25 S2-14: oui, c'est ça. jusqu'à 2 mai on cherche l'info + commence à échanger
26 S2-14: 2-8 mai - envoi croisé "officiel"
27 S1-14: nous reste 1-2 semaines pour faire ca :)
28 S2-14: cool! on va réussir! oleo
29 S2-14: je te tiens au courant
30 S2-14: toi aussi, ok?
31 S1-14: ok. i hope my internet connection will not screw it up
32 S2-14: hope so 2!)

To start with, in the excerpt presented above we can detect a series of three formulas at work:

- L2=L2 (Engl.) (ll. 1-9, ll. 31-32),
- L2a (Fr) ≠L2b(Engl) (ll. 10-11, ll. 19-21, ll. 24-25) ,
- L2b (Fr) ≠L2c(Ru) (ll. 12-13), and
- L2=L2 (Fr) (ll. 26-30).

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Although it is not within the scope of our paper to analyze the socio-political backgrounds of the participants, we have to note that, surprisingly or not, it is the Russian correspondents part of the three pairs whose texts have been subject to analysis who, in various degree, are reticent about using English as L2 as they seem to be worried about being reprimanded by their teachers (see the e-mail in Excerpt 2 and l. 4 in Excerpt 3). Their preference for French as L2 is either clearly stated as it is the case with S2-10 and S2-14 or it can inferred by the keyboard settings (cf. l.11 and l.16 where this is obvious in the spelling of the noun ' préférences').

However keen on using French as L2, in l.13, S2-14 misspells the French 'idée' as the English 'idea' , providing us with an example of the use of *interlanguage*. This term was first coined and developed by Larry Selinker in 1972. His interlanguage theory states that type of language is produced by second language (L2) learners and consists of a system of rules and applications that can bear either the features and rules of the native language (L1) where L1 patterns are borrowed, or of both L1 and L2 when their patterns are mixed, or which is the case here, L2a (French) bears the features of L2b (English) (cf. Salinker: 1992).

Going back to the issue of multilingualism, besides the three instances where S1-14 uses Russian words and phrases (l. 1, l. 4, and l.12), and the single case when his turn-taking is in French, L1-14, like L1-6 above, uses exclusively English. In ll. 5-6 he puts his partner at ease by indirectly assuring her that communication will not be impeded by the second language they will use and, at the end of their chat discussion, made up of 2 sessions, it shows that, indeed, no misunderstanding occurred, but in fact their message exchange was disrupted, in fact, due to some technical problems (cf. ll.19-20)

3. Informal language learning and knowledge management

The last section discusses several aspects regarding the relationship set between informal language learning and power management, which has already been anticipated in the previous pages which illustrated how English was preferred as L2 by three of the Romanian participants in order to render more personal thoughts. On this occasion we have witnessed a process where another, parallel, context was produced, a process where the constraints imposed by a pre-determined topic (negotiating on company presentations) and pedagogical language usage (practicing French) were eluded. When discussing pedagogical discourse, Basil Bernstein underlines its regulatory properties which establish order, ideology and identity beyond any specific knowledge form it seeks to transmit. He views it as *arising out of the action of a group ofa specialized agents operating in a specialized setting in terms of interest, often competing interests*. (2000: 113) He goes so far as to claim that pedagogic practice acts as a *symbolic ruler for consciousness* (p. 36). If he is correct, then certainly we can say that hierarchical, expert–novice relations are a central orienting principle of pedagogy. Breaking out of pedagogical discourse, devices and principles, then, becomes an inherently political act.

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Berstein's theory on pedagogical discourse is influential. One of the researchers that acknowledges Berstein's significant role played in his understanding of how control is implicated in discourses of teaching and learning is Peter H. Sawchuk. In his article "Informal Learning as a Speech-Exchange System: Implications for Knowledge Production, Power and Social Transformation" (2003), Sawchuk claims that informal learning may be a means of transforming rather than reproducing knowledge forms. According to him, *learning can be understood as a collective accomplishment limited or enabled by local social procedures* (294) and knowledge management can be detached from any expert–novice relationships. Moreover, he implies that hierarchical knowledge/power relations are not necessarily definitive of the learning process and he demonstrates that novices manage to construct a *zone of proximal development* (293), engaging thus in *a process of unsettling taken-for-granted themes of power, control, and knowledge* (304).

Conclusion

In the corpus samples analyzed we could see how each chat participant contributed to the formation of the conditions for the other's knowledge production process, without acting as the primary control owner in the knowledge production process. Following Sawchuk, learning and we should add, *online* language learning, has to be reconsidered and it has to be valued for its open process which is able to unfold democratically.

As already pointed out, informal learning provides L2 learners with the possibility to communicate with the real world when also dealing with task based learning as well as with the possibility to co-construct knowledge in a democratic manner.

To conclude with, the findings that emerged from the analysis of the empirical data presented in the section 'Social media and informal language learning' validate our assumption that innovative language teaching methods can be developed with the immersion of Web 2.0 tools in the field of language learning. In this sense, we should not overlook the fact that social media have a great potential to include groups that usually have restricted opportunities and access to regular language learning and teaching, in our case students from Central and Eastern Europe Universities. Although the informal learning contexts that have been subject to close scrutiny lacked teachers' control of the learning process, it was students' responsiveness, their creative expression, social interaction and construction of digital identities that represented the primary focus of our attention. Thus, the selected corpus proved that social media enable more equal student participation and a heightened degree of motivation for language practice.

However, the use of social media in language learning should not be limited to develop mere language skills. It should also boost and promote reflection, through communicative skills, on autonomous learning and learning in general.

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