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Disruptive Technologies and Language Learner Identity in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Digital information and communication technologies are providing language learners and teachers with new opportunities, but they also are disrupting more traditional ways of learning. While many of the new online tools have the potential to foster communication and collaboration – crucial elements in successful language learning – the different materiality of the online medium is not only changing the nature of how we learn but it also has repercussions for language learners' identity. This article explores how notions of space, time and the body are differently conceptualized when language learning takes place online and at a distance, and how this has been changing our perception of what constitutes a language learner.

Keywords

Online Language Learning, Disruptive Technologies, Learner Identity

1. Introduction

At the end of the year 2020, the number of Internet users worldwide stood at almost 5 billion, having grown over 1,200% since 2000 (internetworldstats.com/stats.htm). Similarly, the amount of digital information continues to increase exponentially, and the growing use of portable computers (e.g. in the form of mobile phones) is allowing a greater number of people to access information whenever and wherever they are. There has also been a proliferation of online tools and technologies that can be used for learning purposes – both with other people and on one's own – and this in turn has changed how we perceive learning. As Edwards and Usher observed, "globalizing processes and associated trends towards discourses of lifelong learning raise questions over what precisely we designate as specifically a learning context. Pedagogy, therefore, now has to be seen in a context wider than the classroom both temporally and spatially – in relation to curriculum, the identity of learners and socio-economic and cultural contexts" [2, p. 9]. Technologies and tools that lend themselves to online learning range from assistive technologies, presentation and multimedia technologies, social networking tools, mobile technologies, gaming, simulations and virtual reality technologies to virtual learning environments (see [17]).

The digital information and communication technologies are thus providing learners and teachers with new opportunities, offering for example easy access to self-directed learning as well as fostering communication and collaboration – both crucial for language learning. But is the different materiality of the online medium not only changing the nature of how we learn but also the nature of the learner? This paper will focus on the impact that the new technologies are having on language learner identity.

2. Disruptive and transformative technologies

Traditionally, learning took place in particular contexts, and for a long time our understanding of what a learner is was closely associated with educational institutions where learning happens in synchronous time and is embodied, with learners and teachers physically present. In contrast, today's online technologies are providing learners and teachers with new opportunities to engage in interaction, thus disrupting the more traditional ways of learning [4, 12, 16]. This is particularly relevant in the context of language learning, where interaction with other speakers of the language is key and where

the new communication technologies can offer new possibilities. However, while many of the new digital tools have the potential to foster communication and collaboration – both crucial for language learning – the different materiality of the online medium is not only changing the nature of how we learn but also the nature of the learner [5].

In the following section I will explore how time, place and the body are conceptualized differently in online learning environments, how this affects our understanding of what it means to be a language learner today, and how this language learner identity is constructed and communicated in online spaces, using language but also other meaning-making resources. I will show how time is being flexed online, how the location of learning is shifting from the notion of 'place' to 'space' and from institutions to communities of practice, and how a focus on the body of the learner is being displaced by notions of disembodiment and re-embodiment.

3. Language learner identity

Taking a sociocultural approach, I understand learning as a social practice, with the learner being situated within a particular cultural historical, and institutional context. In terms of language learner identity, this means that this identity is formed by integrating "the individual language learner and the larger social world" [10, p. 2]. As Norton states, "speaking a second language is always identity construction and negotiation" [11, p. 410]. Using the notions of investment, imagined communities and imagined identities, Norton conceives "of the language learner as having a complex history and multiple desires. An investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own social identity, which changes across time and space" [11, p.411].
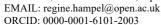
For a long time, however, learner identity was "tied to institutional activities […] through actions that implement institutional agendas" [6, p.121], and this continues in many contexts. Traditional institutional approaches have meant that learning and teaching happen in synchronous time following a strict temporal regime; these activities take place in particular contexts (esp. educational institutions); and they are embodied, with learners and teachers physically present. Thus learner identity in traditional education settings has been constructed as academic competence, physical presentation/competence, behavioural competence, social competence, language proficiency [13]; it is occasioned in a physical classroom within an institution; and it is constituted in the learner–teacher dichotomy, which is evidenced by a whole range of rules and regulations.

So how are these notions of time, place and the body being transformed in online language learning environments, and what is the impact on how we conceptualize the identity of language learners today? I would argue that the new technologies are providing us with new contexts beyond the traditional classroom, providing new and different opportunities for learning. However, this is also resulting in a number of shifts in terms of the temporal, spatial and bodily conditions of learning, namely a shift away from traditional 'speeds and rhythms' [9] of school practice; a shift away from the physical classroom as the main space where learning and teaching take place; and a shift away from embodied communication. All this makes learning today an often substantially different undertaking to what it was in the past. It is important that these shifts are recognized and taken into account if we want to enable language learners to benefit from today's opportunities.

3.1. Flexing time

In the traditional language classroom learning is scheduled – through set class times, fixed periods for subjects – and it is driven by the education system, with teachers focusing on the four skills and grammar and not leaving enough time for communication and interaction. This often results in students perceiving language learning as a difficult undertaking– which can lead to them being put off learning a language or even developing foreign language classroom anxiety. In contrast, the digital media can offer additional or alternative contexts for learning without the time pressure that a traditional classroom imposes, providing 24/7 access to materials as well as to speakers of the language and recording

facilities. It also allows learners greater choice between modes of communication, with asynchronous tools giving them more time to plan their interaction and the opportunity to revisit it. And environments such as virtual worlds or online games can provide an immersion experience where players forget everything around them, including the time spent – an experience that is reminiscent of Csikszentmihalyi's (1992/2000) notion of 'flow' [1].

3.2. From place to space

Face-to-face learning traditionally happens in specific locations and in shared spaces that are imbued with social and cultural meaning, for example a classroom in a school or a university. These places have particular physical properties (furniture, resources etc.) and are populated by set actors – teachers and students – who have a particular relationship and certain ways of interacting. While learning with the help of the digital media often takes place in a physical classroom, it can also happen in a less bounded space, that is, in the wider world. Thus, the new technologies provide new opportunities for learners to interact with other learners of the language, and they give access to target language communities (e.g. for telecollaborative exchanges). They also offer the potential for new pedagogical approaches such as mobile learning, where learners engage with location-specific language material (see [7]); and they open up 'learning in the wild' [14, 15] in particular communities of practice (e.g. virtual worlds, online games, fan communities).

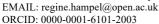## 3.3. Disembodiment and re-embodiment

The traditional classroom is characterized by physical presence and by learners having certain observable physical characteristics. Both teachers and students use their body to interact in particular ways in this physical environment, with non-verbal communication (e.g. through gestures or facial expressions) playing an important role. In contrast, when communicating online the computer adds a level of mediation and as a result the online interaction can feel to be more disembodied and less immediate than in face-to-face communication. Many online environments do not include a video channel and the lack of body language can lead to misunderstandings and to deindividuation or disinhibition. On the other hand, virtual worlds and online games offer learners the possibility of taking on a new persona (e.g. with the help of avatars), thus providing greater freedom and resulting in a kind of 're-embodiment' which can be liberating for learners.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This paper set out to show the disruptive impact that the new technologies are having on how we conceptualize language learners and their identity today. The new communication tools that are available to a large number of people across the world open up new learning contexts beyond the traditional classroom, for example by giving access to other speakers of the language (formally through e.g. organized telecollaborative exchanges or informally e.g. through joining a group of online gamers or fans). This offers language learners the possibility of engaging with and investing in the language as a social practice for real-life purposes – rather than as a school subject with little real-world relevance.

However, this also has repercussions for language learners' identity. Notions of time, space and the body are differently conceived when language learning is done online and at a distance, and this has been changing our perception of what constitutes a language learner. As we have seen, the online media allow for a more flexible approach to time, by giving access to the second language (and second language speakers) anytime, and allowing for asynchronous as well as synchronous communication. The use of digital communication tools is also resulting in a change from a focus on language learning happening in a particular place to a focus on space or spatiality, which includes a shift away from

physical institutions to online as well as 'real' world settings where the new language is a tool with real-world relevance (e.g. in the context of mobile learning).

This means that the new digital technologies can support learners in becoming part of a distributed community which is larger than a class – and which can function as a community of practice [8] or an affinity space [3], with online games or virtual worlds offering learners an immersion experience. While the new technologies entail a move from embodied to disembodied communication, they also provide the opportunity for what I would like to call re-embodiment – for example through taking on a particular identity in an online game and in a virtual world which might reflect one's 'real world' identity or which might be totally different.

However, these changes can also be experienced as alienation, with learners getting lost in the vast space of the Internet. And there are other issues that are arising from the growing use of digital tools for language learning. These include a lack of digital and online skills to use the new spaces to best effect as well as anonymity, anxiety, obsessive behaviour, and cyber bullying. These issues can be avoided by ensuring that both teachers and learners are appropriately trained and supported, for example in terms of developing digital literacy and becoming aware of possible issues relating to cyber security. Teachers need to be able to support and motivate students at a distance and to ensure that learners who interact with others outside their cultural comfort zone develop appropriate intercultural competence. All this will help learners to construct and negotiate their identity in a second language, an identity which is formed by an integration of the individual language learner and the larger social world of the second language.

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