“I h8 txt msgs”. How Social Media Has Had an Impact on Language Awareness

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The use of technology – and in particular the nearly ubiquitous use of social media among diverse populations and profiles – has long been of interest to academics and scholars (see Palfreyman, 2007). In its incipient stages, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) was usually adopted to refer to text-based communication mediated by computers, but rapid technological advances in recent years have heralded an era of multiple and often simultaneous modes of communication. As multimodal, technology-mediated communication has become ‘normalized’ practice in personal and professional lives, educational initiatives – particularly language teaching and learning – are following suit.

Parallel to the growing use of social media, vox populi often laments the ‘dumbing down’ of language use, instigated by the high visibility of popular acronyms, abbreviations and coinage of new words coming from social media contexts. However, studies show that social media quite often has an opposite effect on language learners. To wit, they may become more aware of their own language use, e.g. mistakes may be pointed out or corrected automatically or through crowdsourcing, as has been documented in Twitter use or other social media such as MMORPGs and ‘fandom’ sites (forums, fiction-writing, cf. Thorne and Payne, 2005; Sauro 2013, 2014). Other scholars point out that the ‘casual’ language use employed in social media is concurrent with, and transferable to, the sociopragmatic and intercultural competences needed in multiple contexts, including face-to-face environments (cf. Abrams, 2009).

The impression that social media is rapidly changing the way in which language is consumed and produced is quite commonplace. Consider, for instance, this headline “I h8 txt msgs: How texting is wrecking our language” (Humphrys, 2007). Most of the focus of recent publicity about language changes (or deterioration, as seen by some) is on the use of text messaging (mobile phones) and internet communication in ‘rapid’ communication formats such as tweets, blog posts or the use of emoticons as replies to forum or social media posts. These perspectives ignore the fact that the internet is not the only technological phenomenon that has had an impact on the way in which people communicate. Many words and phrases have been introduced into languages through radio (‘roger and out’), television (‘Tardis’ meaning something that is much larger on
the inside than it looks on the outside, based on the time machine that resembles a police telephone box from the BBC television series *Doctor Who*) and telephones (‘hold on’) are just a few examples.

Along with concerns about the weakening of ‘standard’ language use, there has also been considerable attention in public discourse about the role of social media and its effect on youth in today’s globalized world. In some cases, perspectives have been quite optimistic and in others, gloweringly negative, or at most, contradictory in themselves. As Stern (2008) explains it:

A curious mix of intrigue, disdain, and apprehension continues to characterize many adults’ sentiments about the creations young people place into the public eye on the Internet. Indeed, it is common to see journalists, educators, and parents oscillate between promoting youth Internet expression and denouncing it in practically the same breath.

*Stern, 2008: 95*

Another arena that has received substantial focus is the impact of technology on education (in particular social media and language learning: see Parr, 2014). Voiced concern about learners (as future ‘global’, ‘digitalized’ citizens) regarding what skills and competencies they must have, what knowledge they are constructing (or missing) – in particular in formal language use – through the use of social media are prevalent in public debates. These debates are often coupled with arguments that social media is rendering entire generations of youth and children illiterate in anything but ‘textspeak’.

With these questions in mind, this chapter explores how links between the uses of social media has an impact on individuals’ and groups’ levels of awareness of language and communication. The text first provides a brief overview of how Language Awareness (LA) is understood in this text and its importance to social media, followed by a discussion of the different perspectives of the influence of social media on language and language users. Finally, the chapter considers promising areas of research that take into consideration the complexity of social media and language awareness as a nexus.

**The Role of Language Awareness, Social Media and Language Education**

While this is also covered elsewhere in this handbook, it is imperative to first establish how Language Awareness is understood in this chapter before considering the impact of social media on LA. According to James and Garrett (1992), the scope of LA encompasses attention and awareness in language use and language learning, language teaching, as well as intercultural communication. In this chapter, attention and awareness during language use and language learning, as well as intercultural communication serve as categories for discussion of studies of LA and social media. However, language teaching is not taken into account, because it spans too many pedagogical undertakings that might include social media, from minimal use (e.g. complementary use of social media for post-lecture comments) to complete integration (e.g. distance learning executed through online communication platforms).

Framed within language education, Fairclough (1992) described LA as the conscious attention of an individual in regards to various features of both language and language use. According to Arndt, Harvey and Nuttall (2000), LA in education can have several benefits such as increased appreciation of the complexity
LA encourages individuals’ awareness of the transferability of knowledge about and between languages, as well as a broader and deeper understanding of how languages are part of social practices that cannot exist outside the sociocultural milieu in which they are used.

LA involves a wider sense of what constitutes discourse, including multiple semiotic codes (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001, 2006; van Leeuwen, this volume). These authors outline a theory of communication that moves beyond a mono-modal perspective to one that is multimodal, thereby capturing the way in which lines are continually blurred between different modes (e.g. written, oral, visual, tactile) and through different media of communication. This meta-theory aims to describe what happens in various sites of practice (e.g. considering how individuals use diverse modes of social media in communicative practice). These perspectives, in turn, draw attention to the way in which semiotics, along with technologies for producing/recording and distributing multimodal texts, have a role in creating meaning in specific semiotic practices.

This meta-theory of multimodality in communication is crucial for understanding the interplay between LA and social media; also in relation to social media and language education. Kramsch (2006) argues that educational needs of today go beyond knowing how to communicate meanings; learners must come to understand the process of meaning-making itself. This implies sophisticated competence in the manipulation of symbolic systems – including the many variants of discursive modalities (spoken, written, visual, electronic, etc.). Learners must be able to interpret meaning from discourse features, or as Kramsch (2006: 251) has put it, students must have “symbolic competence”.

It is difficult not to concede that learners’ needs and teaching designs are affected by the omnipresence of the decentred, multimedia character of new electronic media (…). To begin with, there is a need for different types of reading (reading for gist, scroll reading, conceptually linking different texts available through hyperlinks, etc.), not to mention the knowledge needed for diverse navigational aspects (Pegrum refers to “hypertext literacy” (2009: 38)). Added to this list are the additional modalities available in Virtual Environments (VEs) or Virtual Worlds (VWs). In these online contexts, communication can be text-based (instant messaging and text chat) although the communicators may also make use of the possibilities offered by gestural, visual, proxemic and deictic non-verbal modalities.

Additionally, these ‘global’ competences must be situated within what Vertovec (2007) has called “super-diversity”; that is to say most of today’s modern societies are, in actuality, complex environments characterized by internally overlapping linguistic and cultural diversity and continuous exchanges between languages and cultures on a global scale. Implicit to this idea is that most of the world’s population (to not say everyone) is ‘plurilingual’ and pluricultural’ (with at least some minimal notions of several languages and cultures), coupled with the general understanding that monolingual nations do not exist, even those claiming to be homogeneous (Beacco and Byram, 2003). The growing acceptance of ‘pluri’-individuals suggests a need for ‘pluralistic’ didactic approaches to language education (cf. Candelier et al., 2012); approaches that can and should integrate the pervasive presence of social media, including an awareness of the complexity of communication through this medium, sufficient cognizance of its
Social Media Impact on Language Awareness

Semiotics (symbolic competence), as well as an understanding of how social media can support plurilingual and intercultural learning.

**Social Media and Language Changes: ‘New’ Uses, Awareness and Mindsets**

As mentioned in the introduction, the advent and widespread use of the internet has sparked considerable speculation about its effect on language and language users. Often ‘ill effects’ are attributed to highly visible changes in language use such as the coining of new lexicon that ‘go viral’. Indubitably, the use of social media has contributed to new words being introduced into the English language, some of which are now included in dictionaries (e.g. selfie, tweet, LOL), some of which are mainstream but not yet ‘official’ (e.g. friended, googlesurfing, equaintance) and some that are more specific jargon used by smaller groups of users (e.g. BFN for ‘Bye for now’). In particular, the use of abbreviations has become quite widespread. Nor is it limited to the English language. LOL (for laugh out loud) has been adapted to the French acronym ‘mdr’, which stands for ‘mort de rire’ (‘dying of laughter’), and to the Swedish abbreviation ‘asg’, standing for the term ‘Asgarv’ (‘intense laughter’), whereas in Thai, the number 5 signifies the Thai letter ‘h’, so ‘555’ for Thai text users stands for ‘hahaha’.

It is perhaps this use of abbreviations that has brought on the most indignation from the public concerning its potential detriment to language use over time. Take, for example, the infographic poster published by OnlineCollege.org (Figure 19.1), which extrapolates the growing number of texts sent and received by youth (who, according to the poster “were more likely to use ‘textspeak’”) to a “decline in grammatical skills”. At the same time, it is worthwhile recalling that innovation and technology have often been the whipping posts for a perceived decline in ‘correct’ grammatical language use. In 1986, a Florida newspaper printed an article with this headline: Student Writing Skills Suffering, Report Shows. The article declared that 62% of American 17 year olds demonstrated unsatisfactory writing skills. Interestingly, the current ‘scapegoats’ for such complaints (e.g. Twitter, Facebook and smartphones) were not in existence yet. Going even further back in time, Socrates held his own doubts about the invention of writing, describing concerns that writing could lead to less reliance on memory. He also objected to reading, saying that it might mislead students to think that they had knowledge, when they only had data or facts. Socrates’ worries about the education of youth in his society stands in stark contrast to the common public ‘drive’ underlying many developed countries’ educational policies to ensure that all citizens have basic literacy skills of reading and writing, as is evidenced by this opening statement for an EU report on literacy:

> Asking why literacy is so important may sound like a redundant question. After all, reading and writing are such basic skills. But, by and large, we take these skills for granted in modern European societies.

*European Commission, 2012: 20*

The report discusses the ways in which “digitalization” is an “added dimension” to the concept of literacy (not a detriment to it), providing a definition of a “multi-layered” literacy that has “many different dimensions and links with essential related areas such as numeracy, and digital and social competences” (p. 13).
The ‘demonization’ of social media also stands in stark contrast to the importance of the multi-layered literacy deemed necessary for today’s citizens. In this sense, it would seem that a critical language awareness approach to social media would be more productive. In fact, the infographic poster in Figure 19.1 that decries social media is an example of the ‘multi-layered’ literacy that is becoming increasingly more relevant to the current knowledge society. Infographs are a relatively new means of presenting complex and abundant information through visual displays that are becoming more prevalent in many different areas, including academic publishing, as many journals are now beginning to require visual imagery along with abstracts and keywords. The ‘know-how’ (and awareness) required to create an infograph that effectively communicates multifaceted messages includes making use of both textual and visual semiotics (numbers, images, fonts, etc.) in order to enhance the viewers’ comprehension.

Figure 19.1. Infograph poster of declining writing skills in youth. Source: www.onlinecollege.org/2013/02/12/does-texting-hurt-your-grammar/ Accessed 5 January 2016.
Just as there is a growing awareness of the need to promote multi-layered, ‘digitalized’ literacy practices (although most policies focus on the ability to ‘manage’ the use of digital tools, not new literacy practices of textspeak, etc.), there are emergent counter-arguments to the notion that social media is ‘weakening’ standardized language use. For instance, the mere fact that language use is made more visible to a far wider audience can increase an individual’s awareness of mistakes. This may be through technical resources (highlighting of non-standard spelling or language structures), through the re-mediation of proofreading before posting or sending (in a large part due to awareness of a potential global audience), or by explicit references or corrections made by others (the digital audience).

It also spotlights different organizations of creative communication and expression. Formats such as Vine videos (limited to six seconds) and Twitter (limited to 140 characters per post) are reminders that short can be as effective as long for communicating a message, if done well. Brief but effective communication inevitably requires completely different competences (and the language awareness related to this type of modality) than writing an essay or a report. Moreover, arguably, some of these ‘newer’ genres may not be that different from centuries-old traditions of writing. For instance, a 140-character tweet can be considered comparable to centuries-old Haiku (Japanese-inspired short poetry, consisting of 17 syllables in three lines), especially in the light of Twitter-inspired poems (see https://twitter.com/poetrysociety). Likewise, official report formats are becoming more visual and often include highlighted ‘info-blurbs’ that closely resemble ‘tweets’. Along similar lines, academic journals are increasingly moving towards the use of infographs (similar to the digital poster in Figure 19.1) and ‘audioslide’ summaries (animated online presentations) as audio/visual summaries that complement the traditional text-based abstracts. The ability to recognize these similarities (and learn from and transfer from them) draws another clear link between LA and social media.

Of course, the different social media also offer a larger choice of ‘canvas’ than the more traditional pen and paper. Along with more choices comes the need for awareness of how to most effectively use these opportunities for communication. The ‘layout’, the different available features, the context in which it is produced and consumed; all of this will influence the way in which the message is conveyed and interpreted (see van Leeuwen, this volume).

Thorne and Reinhardt (2008) argue that communication technologies can be used to promote language learners’ sociopragmatic awareness of the target language. However, first, there is a need to acknowledge the ways in which communication technologies have transformed everyday communicative contexts, genres and practices. Similarly, Lundby (2009) emphasizes the proliferation of social media in almost all areas of social life (work, education, leisure, domestic life, vacations, etc.) and the way in which this expansion has affected social changes. In short, almost all of our waking moments are ‘mediated’ through technology of some sort or the other, thereby requiring an explicit awareness of the way in which “no social process can be understood without taking (mass and new) media into account” (Androutsopoulos, 2014: 10). These social processes include newly emergent communicative actions that rapidly become integral to ‘multi-layered’ literacies that are part of everyday language practices.

In this sense, social and linguistic changes cannot be studied as separate processes; they should be seen as reciprocal and in particular, the focus should be on “language practices, that is, the socially situated use of linguistic resources in communicative action” (Androutsopoulos, 2014: 6). These uses include:
conversational recycling of media resources, the organization of social interaction around media devices, the conversationalization of media genres, and cross-modal relations of language to other semiotic modes.

Androutsopoulos, 2014: 6

We now look at past research and case studies of social media and language awareness, in particular in formal language learning contexts.

Studies into the Use of Social Media for Language Learning and LA

In her article on the potential of social media for promoting language learning, Zourou offers this reminder:

Let us not forget though that the “buzz” around social media is also linked to the fact that it encompasses not a single tool but a set of tools, and that the possibilities for language learning and teaching are multiplied accordingly. The differences between social media applications are such that it is impossible to treat the social web as a whole and to make claims about their pedagogical value – if any – in general.


Zourou then underscores the difference between Web 2.0 and social media. Basing her definitions on Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), Zourou argues that Web 2.0 is understood as the technological platform(s) that enables social media applications to evolve, whereas social media are understood as internet-based applications that allow user-generated content. Finally, the author points out social media is at an intersection between learning and social purposes as “uses of technologies for learning are intermingled with uses of these tools for social and leisure activities” (Zourou, 2012, “Implications”, para 29).

Along those lines, Wang and Vásquez (2012) claim that “tens of thousands of educators have begun to experiment with the tools offered by Web 2.0 and the field of L2 education is no exception to this trend” (p. 413). Given these numbers, it is difficult to get a global picture of the ways in which social media and LA in language education intersect. As Svalberg (2007) has pointed out, carrying out a comprehensive review of studies on LA is difficult due to “the holistic nature of LA” (Svalberg, 2007: 287) and the fact that “language learning is not easily isolated from other objectives” (ibid.). Reviewing studies on LA, language learning and social media is even more complicated due to the volume of social media practices.

As regards language learning and social media, most studies discussing educational aspects of the use of the internet tend to use the term ‘Computer-Mediated Communication’ (CMC), rather than social media, when discussing online interaction between language learners. Studies indicate that internet use can contribute to language learning through increased interaction in the target language (Thorne, Black and Sykes, 2009) and both research and practice have increased significantly, as more and more language classrooms become “wired” (Dooly, 2015). As one of the aforementioned authors (Thorne) states in an interview:

[L]anguage learning involves a lot more than ‘language’ per se. Through online intercultural exchanges, we are also learning how to create and participate in
different kinds of social relationships. This idea of developing relationships of significance and maintaining these relationships through the use of a new language is a very powerful way to reframe language learning as the development of resources for doing social life.

Antoniadou, 2011: 100

Taking a wider scope than CMC, in their comprehensive review of articles published on Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and English language learning, Macaro, Handley and Walter (2012: 6) found that “the largest number of studies focused on vocabulary (24%) and writing (24%). Next came reading (22%). Half as many studies focused on speaking (11%) and listening (10%). Then came grammar (7%) and, finally, pronunciation (3%)”. While there is no mention of LA as the focus of study in any of the articles reviewed, there is an assumed relationship as regards studies about the ‘noticing’ that is required for increase in vocabulary, improvement in writing, enhanced output. As Svalberg (2007) puts it, “Attention and awareness come together in noticing” (p. 289).

Given the lack of mention of LA in the CALL review of 2011, it is of note that four years prior, a Special Issue of Language Awareness in 2007 was dedicated to LA in online media (cf. Palfreyman, 2007). The articles in the issue discuss “different aspects of language, awareness and technology” (Palfreyman, 2007: 4). These range from multilingual awareness (drawing from multiple language resources for intercomprehension in online chat interactions, Aráujo e Sá and Meló, 2007) to intercultural awareness during online collaboration, as well as reflection on own language use (Dooly, 2007). Farabaugh (2007) considers the interplay between technology and LA – in particular ‘literary awareness’ in her study that involved the use of wiki as the mode of communication concerning metaphors and imagery in Shakespeare’s writings. In this sense, Farabaugh broadens the concept of LA to include Gee’s (1999) notion of Discourse (with a capital D), that is, “a way of talking and thinking about language in a particular discipline, which is associated with a discourse community” (Palfreyman, 2007: 5). In this same volume, Ishihara (2007) discusses one of the few cases found that was developed explicitly to raise learners’ awareness in pragmatics (Japanese as the target language).

In Alsic (Apprentissage des langues et systèmes d’information et de communication), in 2012 another Special Issue was dedicated exclusively to social media and language learning. In her editorial, Zourou (2012) underscores three principal features of social media that optimize its potential for language learning: user participation (production, curation, re-use and re-mixing as means to exploration and creativity of language use); openness (invitation for different levels of participation and being involved in the social media, motivation for interaction); and network effects (bottom-up and user-oriented features contributing to less institutionally led interaction). While all of these features, in theory, can be related to the promotion of LA, there is no explicit mention of LA as an aim for language learning through social media. Indeed, this appears to be the common denominator for most of the studies on social media and language learning: LA seems to be an unexpected outcome (the principal aim for pedagogical endeavours that engage students in online communication looks to be mostly practice rather than reflection on practice).

Indeed, the notion of some reflexivity involved in understanding the language features is a recurrent theme in many studies concerning social media and language learning but
an explicit focus on LA is difficult to find, especially in more recent years. This may be due to the rather vague notion of “how LA is constructed by language learners and teachers” (Svalberg, 2012: 376) – in a large part due to the very complexity in which LA takes place. As Svalberg (2012) indicates, “classrooms and other language learning contexts are complex” (p. 376). Social media – as one of the ‘other language learning contexts’ – further contributes to this complexity as is witnessed by the very features highlighted by Zourou in her 2012 editorial article. Social media is, at the end of the day, a means for communicative activities that take place both locally and globally. It is about interactions that, by nature, cannot be teacher-centred as the number of interactants and possible resources multiply exponentially by its networking effects.

Online social media, after all, involve the messy, unpredictable use of human language for motivated, authentic purposes, a phenomenon that does not lend itself to laboratory controls. Social media involve evolving forms of human interaction, forms of interaction that require new approaches to understanding language learning and teaching along with research perspectives, approaches and techniques that serve in building such understanding.

Meskill and Quah, 2012: 41

Still, as Svalberg points out:

[All LA research focuses on LA as process or as product, or sometimes both. More precisely, it may focus on the ENGAGEMENT WITH LANGUAGE (EWL) process through which LA is constructed (Svalberg, 2009) or the resulting or pre-existing LA itself in the form of language and language-related knowledge, beliefs and attitudes.

Svalberg, 2012: 377

This notion of how the learner engages with the target language (and is made aware of this engagement) is another recurrent theme in social media and language learning research. Several studies on CMC have found that there are increased opportunities for students becoming aware of specific features in the target language due to the medium of communication. The format itself of text, forum or email communication may promote greater reflection on the target language. Enforced limitations on the amount of text in some formats (e.g. tweets), the ‘mirror’ effect of seeing written ‘conversation’ or the possibility of revising text before posting or sending may all promote more explicit noticing of language features as well as increased recognition and correction of learner errors. Additionally, these social media affordances (written traces, oral recordings) can help language learners involved in interactions with more competent language users notice new features of the target language and subsequently have greater access to new lexicon and structures.

For language awareness perhaps the most interesting aspect of the online language is its relation to speech and writing. The register of writing in CMC is usually informal, being more like the language of handwritten notes than that of letters or books. Synchronous media such as chat, in particular, tend to involve language use which is fairly ‘conversational’, characterised by a fluid structure, short turns and context-dependency (Herring, 1996). Balancing the fleeting, volatile nature of
CMC discourse, however, is the fact that the product is usually written language which can be reviewed. This is clearly the case for asynchronous media such as email or discussion boards, which can be read and re-read indefinitely. However, even in a chatroom, a participant wanting to follow and take part in the discourse can read back over the last few contributions on the screen before responding, and chat software also often allows the user to save the conversation for reading at leisure afterwards.

Palfreyman, 2007: 3

It is precisely textchat’s similarities to oral conversation (e.g. it involves turn-taking; requires socio-pragmatic competences, etc.) that can be brought to the language learner’s attention. Because the format allows the participants to see what has been said before as well as their own responses (visible traces of the conversation), learners can focus more explicitly on everyday speech acts (Palfreyman, 2007). In a study on an exchange between Native (NS) and Non-Native speakers (NNS), Tudini (2003) found that interaction with native speakers provided NNS learners with insight into casual conversational discourse features of the target language. She also found that this led to opportunities for rehearsal of the new features for the NNS learners. In Yamada and Akahori’s (2007) comparative study of learners participating in text-based chat (with and without interlocutors’ images), video conferencing, and audio conferencing, it was found that the learners who participated in text-based communication “seemed to be more conscious of accuracy in communication” (p. 61) due to the salient nature of their errors visible in text form. Lomicka and Lord (2009) point out that, as learner proficiency increases, the use of social media can be optimized in order to stimulate greater metalinguistic awareness of language structures and sociocultural aspects of language use.

In her review of the state-of-the-art in LA (again, not focused on social media), Svalberg (2007) highlights that research shows that learners are likely to benefit from “cognitive conflict” (p. 295) stemming from noticing of gaps of their own production if it gives them opportunity to talk about the errors and how to correct them. A number of researchers have highlighted the way in which social media can facilitate noticing (cf. Kitade, 2000; Lai and Zhao, 2006; Payne and Whitney, 2002), which, according to Schmidt (1990, 2010) is necessary for transforming language input to comprehended intake. However, it is important to note that almost all of the studies found on social media and language learning related to heightened student awareness of the target language differed from what Svalberg (2006) called the ‘talk-about’ element of LA methodology. For Svalberg, the LA methodology involves learners talking analytically about language (cf. Borg, 1994), not just communicating in the target language (and subsequent noticing which might occur).

However, in a study on collaborative blog writing, Kessler (2009) found that students tended to focus their attention on the creation of meaning and to be far less concerned about the accuracy of language output. The participants in the study indicated that the social media environment (perceived as an informal context) led the students to feel less pressure to be ‘grammatically correct’. So there seems to be a tension between the ‘talk-about’ pedagogical approach that most likely aims for attention to accuracy and learners’ perceived aims when using social media to communicate in a target language with other learners. This is corroborated by other studies that find the language-negotiation that takes place in social media language learning interactions tends to focus more on lexicon.
or content than on ‘correct’ language use or grammatical aspects (Blake, 2000; Jepson, 2005; Kessler, 2009; Kitade, 2000; Lee, 2008; Pelletieri, 1999; Sotillo, 2000).

Another feature of LA is the notion of conscious attention of an individual in regards to specific features or strategies of language use in particular situations. Sykes’ (2005) research into the development of L2 pragmatic competence (specifically looking at invitation refusal strategies) highlights the opportunities for conscious planning of communication strategies before responding to invitations in a CMC format. The features described above provide more time for formulating the response than face-to-face communication, which requires more immediate and spontaneous responses.

Nonetheless, not all of the studies indicated that explicit focus on language use was considered positive by learners involved in online exchanges through social media. In particular, explicit feedback, especially between peers, was deemed by many as uncomfortable or stressful, and in some cases comments were ill-received, due to perceived lack of ‘authority’ of the online peer (Dooly, 2007). A study by Ducate and Lomicka in 2008 – and another one by Dippold in 2009 – found that students were reluctant to give feedback to others, largely due to their perceived lack of expertise, and a need for more guidance on how to give appropriate observations to their peers. This seems to indicate the need for preparing students for this type of LA activity before using social media for such tasks.

Intercultural competences have been a salient area of research for exchanges through social media (Audras and Chanier, 2008; Belz, 2002; Belz and Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Jin, 2013; Kinginger, Gourves-Hayward and Simpson, 1999; O’Dowd, 2003). Research into the development of the interculturality of language learners using online exchange, often through observation of their interactions (Abrams, 2013; Bouyssi, 2009; Dooly, 2007; Schenker, 2012; Tudini, 2007) have been carried out, demonstrating that the interaction with learners across the world helped raise learners’ intercultural awareness. It should be noted, however, that the competences embedded in intercultural awareness tended to be either vaguely defined or used quite differently according to context.

Areas for Further Research

Research into LA in relation to social media has enhanced understanding of how digitalized communication can optimize several related aspects of LA; although arguably the principal point of focus of such studies has been on the way in which communication through social media can bring about more explicit reflexivity concerning language use (Aráujo e Sá and Meló, 2007; Dooly, 2007; Kitade, 2000; Lai and Zhao, 2006; Payne and Whitney, 2002; Tudini, 2003; Yamada and Akahori, 2007) and the role this reflection can have on language development. Svalberg (2007) wrote in her state-of-the-art paper on LA that:

Noticing should be further explored; for example, the relationship between noticing and subsequent production, and between noticing and learner styles, together with the affective variables which promote or hinder noticing. LA needs to be studied in different social, cultural and material contexts.

Svalberg, 2007: 302

Although there indubitably have been considerable advances in this area, there is a need for more longitudinal studies that take into consideration the opportunities for
interaction through social media for both noticing and what might be called the ‘post’-noticing production (reproduction of the noticed features in ensuing social media use). Thornbury (2001) proposes that “unless the learner notices the effect that grammatical choices have on meaning, … the noticing is not sufficient to have any long-term effects on restructuring” (p. 292). Thus far, most studies about social media and language learning have discussed demonstrations of language learners’ explicit awareness of elements of the target language use within rather limited timeframes (e.g. one-to-two chat sessions or data corpora of a one-term social media exchange between participants). There is a need for more studies that trace demonstrated language learners’ attention on particular linguistic features and whether these features later become part of the learners’ language output. Furthermore, it would be of great interest if longitudinal studies took into consideration whether language input from social media use leads to demonstrable restructuring of language use in both face-to-face and digital communication.

The effect of social media itself on learner language awareness also needs further analysis. As noted in studies on peer feedback in CMC environments, the perceived informality of the social media environment may have an impact on the way in which the students focus their attention. That is to say, they may place more importance on meaning (getting their message across to the other interactants) than on form (Kessler, 2009). This area of study dovetails into the question of learner awareness concerning the sociopragmatics of social media and how language learners can best develop the “symbolic competences” (Kramsch, 2006: 251) required for effective interaction through exponentially expanding modes of communication. As Kearney explains:

> Intercultural and symbolic competences as goals of ML (*Modern Languages, this author’s addition*) education have to some degree marked professional dialogue and impacted teaching practices. Yet, ML education could be positioned even more clearly as a site for working with meaning potentials and expanding meaning-making repertoires. (...) [A] great deal more empirical research needs to be conducted that will clarify the processes that can occur in a range of possible teaching and learning interactions (...). Research will also need to apply rigorous methods and standards for making claims about what constitutes adequate evidence that development of intercultural competence, and symbolic competence specifically, has taken place for individuals or groups of learners.

*Kearney, 2015: 50*

Similar observations can be made concerning LA and social media studies. Despite the fact that there is a considerable body of research on intercultural awareness promoted through social media interactions, there is a need for further exploration in the way in which these types of exchanges push beyond the concept of ‘connecting cultures’ through CMC and more emphasis on the ways in which language learners are made aware of the varieties of potential meaning-making available through new modes of communication. Arguably, social media itself can be seen as its own culture (a ‘global village’) in the sense that it links people around the world regardless of differences and geographical boundaries, compressing time and space into a quite small interactive field (Chen and Zhang, 2010). Learners need to have a heightened awareness of the way in which this global communication takes place, how it is contextualized and what
resources they have (and will need to develop) in order to acquire efficient global communication competences.

Moreover, the situatedness of virtual communication (versus face-to-face communication) implies a certain ‘fluidity’ of ‘glocal’ positions and use of multiple semiotic resources that merge (and emerge) in and across time and space (Dahlberg Messina and Bagga-Gupta, 2014). Consider, for example, Japanese and Polish participants in a VW videoconference held on a platform especially designed to integrate possibilities for communicating through virtual avatars, textchat, voice chat, instant messaging and drawing boards. Both individuals are taking part in a communicative event at different hours of the day (locally) and yet meeting at the same time (virtually), just as they are situated at different places locally (one at his desk in his office, the other on her couch in her living room) while meeting in the same place (the online conference room). This boundary crossing of ‘glocal’ positions requires awareness of the ways in which language use differs according to context, including variances in proxemics (e.g. what is the required ‘space’ between avatars in a Virtual World?), modifications in gestures (e.g. avatar gestures use specific manipulation features while gestures in textchat are frequently replaced with emoticons) and multiple possibilities for understanding deictics (e.g. where is ‘here’ in the virtual context?).

Conclusion

Building on Svalberg’s observations concerning research in LA, in order for LA research to have an impact on language learning/teaching in the future, there is a need for a better understanding of how “LA is constructed” and facilitated through social media and how results of such LA studies can be applied to globalized language learning environments, “and how it affects language learning” (Svalberg, 2012: 385). In the same review, the author argues that LA research must recognize and “embrace the complexity” of language learning (specifically indicating the interaction in the classroom). As it has been demonstrated here, this complexity increases exponentially as the dimensions of interaction through social media are made more apparent.

Researchers and practitioners alike face the challenge of finding pathways that will support explicit LA pedagogy (cf. Bolitho et al., 2003; Carter, 2003), not only in regards to monolingual target languages but as concerns plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires, all against the mosaic of a ‘networked world’.

From the Internet to the global ecosystem, from the road traffic network to the stock markets, from biological to social systems, massively interconnected, interacting, components make up our vital systems in this world. These systems can be classified as “Complex systems” (Antoniou and Pitsillides, 2007). A network is not, first of all, simply complicated. It is, before all, complex.

Guliciuc, 2014: 373

These are just a few of the numerous issues that will inevitably emerge, as social media becomes a ubiquitous part of our everyday communication. More research into LA pedagogy in CMC and mobile communication will inevitably provide important insights into its potential and applicability for language learning that goes beyond formal classroom environments.
Related Topics
Multiple literacies; digital literacy; multimodality

References


