Imaginary friends, stalking, and curating the Web: An ESL student's use of social media

Luca Giupponi
Iowa State University

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Imaginary friends, stalking, and curating the Web:
An ESL student’s use of social media

by

Luca Giupponi

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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(Computer-assisted Language Learning)

Program of Study Committee:
Volker Hegelheimer, Major Professor
Carol Chapelle
Denise Crawford

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ABSTRACT

Social media is a phenomenon that has only emerged in the last few years, but has quickly become one of the principal venues for communication between individuals. Because of recent technological developments in mobile technologies, individuals can now connect with their social network anywhere and anytime. Participation in networked online communities has been so pervasive that it has started to influence many of the ways in which individuals understand themselves and the world, communicate with each other, and engage in practices such as literacy and media consumption (Thorne & Black, 2008). One of the consequences of this qualitative shift is the development of cultures-of-use that shape the ways in which learners participate in computer-mediated interaction and literacy consumption (Thorne, 2003) and that are often inconsistent with institutionally promoted practices. This mismatch could lead to a diminished effectiveness of traditional computer-mediated pedagogical practices; on the other hand, an increased awareness of existing computer-mediated practices could foster the development of pedagogies that are more effective for language learning.

This study aims to describe the social media habits of an English as a Second Language (ESL) student enrolled in an American university by employing both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. Results show that this student used social networks to cultivate meaningful relationships, to project a true identity to the external world, and to learn about her host culture, and that these practices were carried out with an awareness of her purposes and of each tool’s culture-of-use (Thorne, 2003).
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has become one of the principal venues for communication between individuals: two-thirds (66%) of adults that have access to the internet use social media platforms (Smith, 2011), and the number increases to 89% when looking specifically at college students at American institutions (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012). For many of these students, social media has been a presence in their life as long as they can remember, so much so that life without social media is, for them, inconceivable (boyd, 2007).

Social media use and participation has been so pervasive that it has started to influence many of the ways in which individuals understand themselves and the world, communicate with each other, and engage in practices such as literacy and media consumption (Thorne & Black, 2008). One of the consequences of this qualitative shift, Thorne and Black argue, is the development of cultures-of-use that shape the ways in which learners participate in computer-mediated “forms of language development and literate engagement” (2008, p. 133; see also Thorne, 2003) and that are often inconsistent with institutionally promoted practices. This mismatch could lead to a diminished effectiveness of traditional computer-mediated pedagogical practices (Thorne, 2003); to express the same concept positively, an increased awareness of the ways that students engage in computer-mediated forms of language and literacy development could foster the development of practices that are more effective for language learning.

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1 danah boyd does not capitalize her name when publishing.
The situation is no different for ESL students, and especially for those who embark in postsecondary academic studies in the US: it follows, then, that ESL practitioners should have a solid understanding of the dynamics of social engagement that their students take part in, including factors that promote or hinder such involvement, as well as the effects that such involvement has on ESL students’ academic experience.

**Purpose of the study**

This study describes the social media habits of Grace, an ESL student enrolled in an American university, and to draw connections between these practices and their implications for language development. Employing both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection, the study analyzes the various ways that this particular student presents herself, engages others, and interacts with the L2 culture by maintaining a sophisticated and dynamic presence on multiple social networks.

**Rationale for the study**

The starting point for this research is my own experience in using social media for understanding and relating with the culture of my (by now) adoptive country. Because I felt that using computer-mediated forms of communication such as social media benefited my English proficiency development and cultural awareness, I was interested in investigating this phenomenon in more detail.

When I met Grace, I realized that her complex L2 social media habits were a good example of the type of computer-mediated practices that scholars such as Thorne refer to (see for example Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008); as a consequence, I felt that undertaking

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2 The names reported in this study are pseudonyms in order to preserve participants’ privacy.
this study would give me, as well as other practitioners in the field, the understanding of students’ computer-mediated practices advocated by Thorne and Black (2008, see above).

Readers will be curious about, and possibly question, the choice of framing this investigation as a case study revolving around one single individual. How is it possible to generalize from such an inquiry? While a discussion of the value and feasibility of pursuing generalizability in the social sciences is beyond the scope of this paper (but see Merriam, 1998), it is worth mentioning that properly conducted and reported case studies present scenarios that allow readers to apply relevant findings to their own setting. Duff (2007) puts it this way: “a suitably thick description of research participants and sites allows readers of a case study report [to] determine the generalizability of findings to their particular situation or to other situations" (p. 50). She further argues that discussing findings in terms of transferability, rather than generalizability, allows readers to share the researcher’s responsibility of determining connections between the study context and other settings, thereby alleviating researchers from the need of making premature and unwarranted assumptions and recommendations.

**Research questions**

Although the literature has provided some insight on language learners’ use of social media, it has almost always addressed Foreign Language Education (FLE) settings (see the collection of studies in Lomicka & Lord, 2009) or the implementation of particular social networking tools in ESL settings as part of curricular goals (e.g. Reinhardt & Zander, 2011); thick descriptions of social media use across platforms and for an extended period of time are lacking. To this end, the present study aims to answer the following questions:
1. How does Grace use social media while enrolled in a US institution?

2. How does she use her mobile device in connection with her social media?

**Organization of the study**

The next chapter, Chapter 2, will provide an overview of the theoretical background of the study, as well as of relevant phenomena and issues that have been investigated in the past. Chapter 3 describes the participant in detail and discusses materials and methods of analysis. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study and discusses them in light of each research question. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the main findings, addresses limitations of the present studies, and presents recommendation for pedagogy and future research.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to fully understand the relevance of this study’s findings, it is necessary to situate it in the broader context of Sociocultural theory, a theoretical framework that has understood the development of language and literacy practices as fundamentally connected to the tools used to carry out these practices. This chapter offers a review of relevant SCT constructs and their applications in the areas of language development and learning. In addition, the chapter provides the reader with an overview of pertinent research in the areas of Computer-mediated Communication (CMC), identity development, and the connection between social media, mobile technologies, and language learning.

Learning and language development as social act

Sociocultural theory (SCT) holds that all higher-level cognitive development, including language development, is a result of social interaction; rather than happening in a vacuum (inside a learner’s head), construction and acquisition of skills and knowledge first happen through engagement with others. This, in turn, affects an individual’s cognitive processes (Vygotsky, 1978).

A central tenet of SCT is the concept of mediation, which refers to the interaction between an individual and both the external, physical world of material objects and the internal, mental world. Humans control both worlds through artifacts: physical artifacts (tools) are "inserted between our activity and an external object, ... extend the reach and power of our bodies and their use results in a change in the object towards which they are
directed" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 60). Mental artifacts (signs), such as language, can be similarly used to exert change in the external world, but they differ from physical artifacts in the sense that they are reversible, that is, they can also be directed inwardly to exert change and control "with the goal of self-regulation" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 60).

What is more, “the incorporation of tools or mediational means does not simply facilitate action that could have occurred without them but rather, by being included in the process of behavior, alters the entire flow and structure of mental functions” (Warschauer, 2005, p. 42, emphasis in original). In other words, mediation and cognitive development are not separable from the tools that make them possible.

Warschauer (2005) illustrates this concept by explaining that the introduction of the word processor didn’t simply give us a “traditional form of writing plus the computer” (42), but it generated a completely new form of writing with its own rules, routines, and conventions that need to be understood separately from those of traditional writing. In the same way, computer-mediated communication (CMC) practices in general and social media in particular have influenced communication between individuals, language development, and literacy practices (Thorne & Black, 2008).

**Computer-mediated communication and L2 identity development**

Several studies (Davies, 2011; Kramsch, Lam, & A’Ness, 2000; Lam, 2000, 2006) have argued that CMC, and especially computer-mediated literacy (the act of acquiring, producing, and distributing knowledge through technology) has transformed the way that languages are learned.
In an influential paper, Kramsch et al. (2000) argue that CMC holds great potential for communicative language learning because it can be used to encourage *authenticity* and *authorship*, which are identified as two of the main features of communicative language learning by the authors. In brief, authenticity refers to the use of authentic materials in language teaching, while authorship refers to the need of learners to reconstruct and interpret authentic material on their own terms in order to fully understand it. Moreover, Kramsch et al. (2000) claim that the physical properties of the electronic medium and the way that students engage with it have radically changed the way in which authorship takes place, giving way to *agency*, defined as the power to take meaningful action and to see the results of our decisions and choices (Murray 1997, cited in Kramsch et al. 2000, pg. 97).

Unlike books, whose purpose is mainly that of providing information, the Internet (and even more so social media) is seen as an avenue for projecting one’s own identity or self-representation. Kramsch et al. (2000) explain it this way:

The pleasure of agency is much more than the pleasure that comes from clicking on hotlinks or even being the author of your own sentences. It has to do with the power to construct a representation of reality, a writing of history, and to "impose reception" of it by others... Because the computer can disseminate one's representation of the world inordinately more speedily and economically than the print medium, the feeling of agency is inordinately enhanced (97).

CMC, then, not only allows for negotiation of information, but for a negotiation of the self, transforming the way we use and learn language by transforming the way we represent ourselves through that language (Kramsch et al., 2000).
Entering the online discourse

The extent to which membership in online communities can impact a language learner’s ability to develop and express an L2 identity cannot be underestimated. In an influential study, Lam (2000) discusses the experience of Almon, a Chinese teenager who immigrated to the US with his family when he was eight years old. Lam reports that when she met him, Almon showed significant concerns about his confidence and ability to use English, which led to a pessimistic outlook on his future in the United States: he was struggling in school, and he felt that his low English proficiency was one of the causes of the problem. Additionally, he did not find his ESL courses helpful, and had very little hope that his English would ever improve (Lam, 2000). Upon meeting him several months later, though, Lam discovered a changed Almon: his confidence, demeanor, and attitude towards English had changed for the better. Further investigation led Lam to discover that Almon had created a website on a Japanese pop singer: this website was entirely in English and had become a “meeting point” for an online community of people that shared the same interest. Because the community was made up of individuals from several countries (mostly Asian), it adopted English as its international language. The significance of this study lies in the fact that, through this online community, Almon was able to develop his identity, proficiency, and confidence; this, in turn, made a substantial difference to the quality of his life. Lam (2000) concluded that

Whereas classroom English appeared to contribute to Almon's sense of exclusion or marginalization (his inability to speak like a native), which paradoxically contradicts the school's mandate to prepare students for the workplace and civic involvement, the English he controlled on the Internet enabled him to develop a sense of belonging and connectedness to a global English-speaking community (p. 476).
Online mediated communication, then, seems to have the potential to provide the motivation and encouragement that many learners need to develop their L2 identity in a way that is authentic and discovery-led.

**The advent of Web 2.0**

Whereas Almon’s story took place in a time when online presence was still a novelty for most people, the situation has evolved drastically with the emergence of social media (boyd, 2007). The burgeoning of social networking sites’ popularity was a direct consequence of the advent of Web 2.0, or the “writable web” (Kárpáti, 2009, p. 140); the emergence of Web 2.0 allowed individual users to upload, share, and edit material online, and provided them with a kind of audience that had never been available before. Soon services appeared that banked on this potential in order to establish online communities built on pre-existing connection and/or common interests. As reported above, fully two-thirds of American adults, and almost every young adult, has an online presence of some sort; a few services get the lion’s share of users (e.g. Wikipedia, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest), but new social media sites spring up every day in hopes of filling a previously unclaimed, or even unrecognized, need.

What is the impact of this phenomenon on individuals? Steven L. Thorne has been at the forefront of a research impetus that has repeatedly argued that such significant use of Web 2.0 has caused a “qualitative and physiological shift in cognitive processes” in most of the Western world (Sykes, Oskoz, & Thorne, 2008, p. 529): Web 2.0 tools are changing the concept of authorship and enhancing the potential for self-expression, readership, learner-initiated creation and discovery of material. The extent to which this
transformation is taking place among individuals, it is argued, demonstrates that technology-mediated social interaction has become a form of communication in its own right, emancipating itself from imitating or being a surrogate of face-to-face interaction.

**Redefining literacy**

Some recent studies have looked explicitly at the ways in which social media have enhanced the possibilities for literacy and self-representation. Barton and Lee have conducted several investigations on multi-linguals’ linguistic choices on Flickr, a photo-sharing social network (Barton & Lee, 2012; Lee & Barton, 2011), and have argued that social media blur both the distance between dominant and vernacular literacy, and the separation of global and local identity.

While dominant literacies refer to literacy practices that are externally imposed and controlled by institutional authorities such as government or academia, vernacular literacies are voluntary, self-generated, and self-directed (Barton & Lee, 2012). In their analyses, Barton and Lee showed that social media allows individuals to extend pre-existing vernacular practices to a new level (e.g., extending the practice of sharing physical pictures with friends and family members to that of sharing them with strangers online) but that it also creates opportunities that did not exist before (e.g., publicly evaluating and commenting on other’s pictures, classifying pictures, and interacting with others in multiple languages). This, they argue, is leading to an increase in the importance of vernacular literacies in one’s life, so that they are now as important, fulfilling, and central as dominant literacies (Barton & Lee, 2012).

Further, because sites such as Flickr have a global user base, each individual’s local vernacular practices have the potential to be observed from individuals in numerous
other local contexts. By linking users’ online linguistic choices with their local context, their imagined audience, the content of their photos, and the perceived functions of Flickr, Lee and Barton show that users’ choices of which language to use are “closely related to the extent to which participants intend to project themselves as global or local members of Flickr” (2011, p. 56), and that such practices are leading the same users to create an online identity that is a combination of their local and global identity, resulting in the emergence of a *glocal* dimension (Lee & Barton, 2011). As one example of this phenomenon, Lee and Barton describe the case of Kristie, a Flickr user that chose to represent herself with a bilingual username (English and Chinese) in order to be appealing to a wider audience and to provide a more truthful representation of who she is (Lee & Barton, 2011).

**Social uses of personal photography**

The redefinition of vernacular literacies frequently involves the use of pictures to communicate about the self. Van House (2007) surveyed some of the early work that analyzed the ways in which this phenomenon carried itself out, and found four social purposes of personal photography: *memory, narrative, and identity* (whereas pictures were shared in order to construct one’s identity through narrative); *relationships* (whereas sharing pictures of people together means sharing 'togetherness' itself; as a consequence, images are seen as gifts that can strengthen existing relationships); *self-representation* (whereas people share pictures that represent them as they wish others would see them, both physically and intellectually); and *self-expression* (whereas people share pictures that reflect an individual's unique point of view).
Building on these constructs, then, Van House (2007) conducted her own empirical research of social networking sites and identified two additional kinds of image sharing, which she named *distant closeness* (the act of "staying close to, informed about, people who may be distant physically and/or socially," p. 5) and *photo exhibition*, which included the display of one's artistic abilities and the use of others' pictures as source of inspiration and artistic fulfillment. Van House (2007) also found that users saw posted collections of images as ephemeral, and were more interested in recent images that described the present reality. Lastly, the participants in her study reported that tagging pictures had primarily a social purpose (tags were added for the benefit of other viewers rather than for later viewing by the users themselves).

The findings from Van House’s (2007) study support what Barton and Lee (2012) later argued: new technological affordances both replicate and extend existing vernacular literacy practices. The next section surveys studies that have investigated this phenomenon in connection to language teaching and learning.

**Social media and language learning**

Language teachers and researchers have quickly realized the vast potential for language learning held by social networking sites, and have strived to identify principles and frameworks for evaluating, utilizing, and designing language learning tasks and approaches that exploit the capabilities of Web 2.0. As mentioned above, the bulk of research in the field has been undertaken in connection with the implementation of Web 2.0 and social media tools in FLE and ESL educational settings.
Web 2.0 research in FLE settings

Web 2.0 tools have been used in FLE settings since their inception, and their increase in popularity led to the publication of a special volume titled *The Next Generation: Social Networking and Online Collaboration in Foreign Language Learning* (Lomicka & Lord, 2009). The technologies examined in this volume range from already established tools such as podcasting, Instant Messaging (IM), and RSS to new (at the time) environments such as Twitter and Second Life.

In their survey of recent research in this field, Wang and Vásquez (2012) report that much of the efforts undertaken so far have focused on the investigation of the use of blogs and wikis in SLA; the researchers note that those two are “just the tip of an integration iceberg” in the educational context (Oliver, 2010, cited in Wang and Vásquez, 2012, p. 416) and lament a lack of research addressing some of the more current tools, which also happen to be the ones that are most commonly used by the learners themselves. Furthermore, Wang and Vásquez observe that “many of the case studies reviewed have failed to provide truly in-depth analyses of the investigated phenomena” (2012, p. 422), pointing to a need for more comprehensive studies.

Nonetheless, several benefits of Web 2.0 tools are consistently reported in the studies analyzed: an increase in writing confidence, a facilitation of the use of writing strategies, an enhancement of writing skills, a potential for increased interaction and output, increased motivation and interest, increased cultural knowledge and competence, and increased awareness of audience. In addition, the implementation of such tools has been shown to create learning environments that are comfortable, relaxed, collaborative, community-based, and viewed favorably by the students (Wang & Vásquez, 2012).
Social media research in ESL settings

Less prolific has been the research evaluating the implementation of social networking tools in ESL settings. Two studies stand out in this category: the first investigates Facebook practices and attitudes of a group of IEP students, while the second reports on the implementation of a Facebook-based curriculum in an Intensive English Program (IEP).

Mitchell's study (2012) looked at how ESL students used Facebook independently from any external, institutionally induced motivation. She analyzed nine IEP students’ Facebook practices over the course of a month, and found a very diverse landscape of social networking behavior among the participants: some logged in once every few weeks, while others did so several times a day; some initiated conversation often, while others limited themselves to “lurking” around; some used it mainly in their first language to connect with their friends at home, while others saw it as a tool to practice English with friends from their host community. It was observed that Facebook allowed participants to encounter new vocabulary and cultural customs, practice language-learning and social compensation strategies, and strengthen existing relationships; furthermore, participating in an online community encouraged learners to think about privacy and public/private issues and, even though each student held different opinions regarding privacy, Facebook membership consistently led to an increased awareness on this issue.

What were these learners’ motivations to “be on Facebook”? Interestingly, participants did not list passion for technology or desire to improve their language as reasons for joining Facebook; mostly, learners indicated friendships, cultural
understanding and integration, and novelty as the main grounds for joining the social network, and noted that Facebook was able to meet these expectations. Mitchell (2012) adds that, even though it is hard to measure the amount of language learning that happened through Facebook, "the site gave participants a clear purpose for their language use and increased their output as well as their input" (p. 484).

Unlike Mitchell’s (2012) study, Reinhardt and Zander's (2011) discusses the impact of institutional “encouragement” on learners’ social networking practices; this encouragement came in the form of a curriculum aiming at “developing learner awareness” of Facebook (p. 1) and was administered to IEP students. Using a language socialization framework, the authors argued that “bridging activities” that used authentic materials and settings such as social networking environments could be used to raise learners’ awareness of linguistic, lexical, and pragmatic conventions while also giving them familiarity with a virtual environment that could foster their “agentive” potential (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008).

Despite this great potential, it was found that students showed mixed reactions to Facebook in general and its use in the classroom in particular. Students’ attitudes ranged from uncritical enthusiasm to indifference to belligerent resistance, showing that a host of other factors such as cultural background, pre-existing social media practices (or lack of them), and language-learning beliefs played a big role in determining students’ favorable or unfavorable reception of social networking; this, in turn, influenced students’ social media practices, allowing or preventing them to gain access to a virtual but very real space where they could effectively develop their L2 identity and gain access to L2 cultural practices.
These findings illustrate a concept that Thorne (2003) termed an artifact’s “culture-of-use” (p. 40): apparently neutral tools such as Facebook or email are, in fact, conceptualized differently by different individuals according to their cultural and historical representation and use. This conceptualization is deeply rooted in an individual’s understanding, and it will at times clash with externally imposed views of such tools. Although it may be premature to advance a conclusion, this study’s findings should lead us to question whether grassroots, socially developed practices such as Facebook membership can be institutionally imposed and taught.

**Social media and the mobile platform**

The absence of any discussion on the importance and impact of mobile devices in the literature reviewed above is nothing short of puzzling considering that, as of February 2012, 46% of Americans own a smartphone, with the percentage rising to 67% for the 18-24 age range (Smith, 2012). Although social networks have been device- and platform-agnostic for several years now, researchers have so far assumed either that choice of platform has no impact of learner practices, or that such impact is unimportant.

The following section reviews relevant literature in the area of Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL) and argues that, in order to fully understand ESL students’ social media practices, the contribution of the mobile platform needs to be taken into account.

**Mobile learning**

There has been a remarkable improvement in mobile technologies in recent years. The introduction of the iPhone in 2007 acted as a game-changer, sparking a revolution in
the way we define the concept of mobile phone: besides the basic voice-and-text cell phone functionalities, smartphones can now surf the web, run native applications, record and play audio files, display and take pictures and video, and share everything to any social media (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Along with improvements in the technology itself, there has been an increment in the number of people that own smartphones and make use of their capabilities (Gu, Gu, & Laffey, 2011); furthermore, the fact that most Web 2.0 tools provide smartphone owners with apps to access their services means that, for many users, the mobile platform has become a tool to carry out agency and to project their own identity: in fact, according to the latest report from the Pew Research Center, 59% of smartphone owners in the US use it to access a social networking site (Zickuhr & Smith, 2011). As a consequence, “mobile phones have become the tools for constructing a chronicling of the self” (Ros i Solé et al., 2010, p. 40).

The literature on mobile learning (frequently called m-learning) has highlighted several benefits that can derive from employing mobile devices in education, pointing at the fact that technologies are changing the ways that students learn, communicate, and produce knowledge (Conole, De Laat, Dillon, & Darby, 2008) by supporting social contact and collaborative learning – “claims that have obvious relevance for language learning” (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008, p. 271). Indeed, language learning is one of the more popular applications of m-learning, but recent surveys have found that materials and applications used in MALL are at times just an adaptation of traditional classroom materials with an innovative delivery (Kukulska-Hulme, 2010; Stockwell, 2010). As a consequence many of the salient characteristics of mobile devices, such as portability, connectivity, and multimedia capabilities, are seldom exploited, “even though it is
precisely these affordances that justify using mobile devices at all” (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008, p. 280). Furthermore, a defining trait of this “traditional educational paradigm” (278) is an approach that stresses the importance of teachers providing materials to the students through the mobile platform; this is less than desirable because, as we have seen above, collaboration, self-expression, learner-initiated creation and discovery of material, and the social organization of collective knowledge seem to be central features of everything that happens on mobile phones (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008; Sykes et al., 2008).

The disconnect between the way that learners engage with mobile technologies and the way in which many mobile-based language learning opportunities are presented to them was apparent in Stockwell's (2008) research study, in which he found that a vast majority of students, when given a choice between completing vocabulary-learning activities on their computers or on their phones, decided to do so using their computers, even though materials were modified to fit each platform. To investigate the reasons behind this choice, Stockwell conducted another study in which he set out to “look specifically at whether there were any features inherent to completing activities on the mobile platform that may have affected learners’ decisions to use a PC rather than their mobile phone (and vice-versa)” (Stockwell, 2010, p. 98). The researcher conducted a long-term study in which 75 first-year students in a Japanese university were allowed, over the course of three years, to complete vocabulary-learning activities either on their phones or on their computers; that is, learners were given the freedom to complete each activity on the platform of choice, switching back and forth if they so desired. This study’s findings are consistent with those from the preceding 2008 study: the majority of
the students, when given the choice, preferred to use their computer rather than their mobile device. Furthermore, the data shows that, even though students did just as well on both platforms, they took much longer (approximately twice as long) to complete the tasks on their phones.

Commenting on these results, Stockwell (2010) reasoned that practicality played a major role in influencing students’ decisions. Specifically, after discussing factors such as the cost and inconvenience of the mobile interface, the author observed that “learners just found that the PC was sufficient for their learning needs” (106); that is, switching to the mobile platform did not provide any additional gain to the student. While this is a very valuable observation, Stockwell (2010) went on to conclude that there was a “lack of willingness to try new mobile technologies” (107), which may not be completely warranted considering some of the phenomena discussed above (Lam, 2000; Sykes et al., 2008) and more generally what educators can observe daily: learners are constantly using their mobile phones and they do not seem to lack a willingness to use new technologies that will benefit them. What can be proposed as a supplementary explanation is that learners are discerning in identifying platform-appropriate ways to construct knowledge (Davies, 2011; Thorne, 2003) and, therefore, an understanding of learners’ habits and attitudes towards the mobile platform is necessary if ESL practitioners aspire to make use of it for language learning.

Towards an understanding of mobile phone use

Stockwell acknowledges the same notion when he suggests that “knowing what learners use their mobile phones for in non-learning environments could provide valuable information to determine how mobile usage might be improved” (Stockwell, 2010, p.
107), a course of action that has been recently recommended by several other researchers (Conole et al., 2008; Kukulska-Hulme, 2010; Ros i Solé et al., 2010). It was suggested that, for example, “one way to approach this question is to look at how learners are already using their personal mobile devices for life and learning, to see if there is any kind of match between the nature of these mobile device uses and the characteristics that educators would wish to promote” (Kukulska-Hulme, 2010, p. 6, emphasis added).

Using a series of surveys with adult learners, she identified several trends that have become prominent in recent years: social/community interaction (using social networking and microblogging applications); mobile Internet access (browsing websites and reading news); multimedia uses (watching movies and TV shows; listening to audio books, podcasts, and vodcasts); location-based activity (using GPS to find places; using location-based services); and user-created content (creating pictures and videos). This kind of categorization, it is argued, helps researchers make sense of what learners actually do, which could be a first step towards directing those practices in a way that would be conducive to language learning.

**Understanding the complete picture**

From the studies summarized above, there emerges a need for an in-depth understanding of what language learners presently do in and around online spaces when they have at their disposal a wide range of social media tools, each with its own “culture-of-use”. As well, some light needs to be shed on the contribution that the mobile platform makes to those practices. Not only that, it is time to give them a voice to understand the motivations behind those behaviors. This need is precisely the impetus behind the present research study, which aims to answer the following questions:
1. How does Grace use social media while enrolled in a US institution?

2. How does she use her mobile device in connection with her social media?
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter opens with a detailed description of the study participant, Grace, and her educational context, and describes the criteria according to which she was selected. Then, data collection and analysis methods are presented. Lastly, the chapter provides an overview of the social networks used by Grace over the course of the study.

Participant and context

The present study was designed as a case study, focusing on the practices and attitudes of one ESL student, Grace, who is a Chinese female undergraduate at a large public university in the Midwest; she is 23 years old and has been at the current institution for three years. The first of those years was spent in a pre-university Intensive English Program (IEP); after that, the student passed the IELTS (with a score of 6) and enrolled in regular classes at the university, pursuing a Hospitality and Restaurant Management major. It is worth noting that, in one of the interviews, she stated that she decided to take one year of intensive English instruction because she felt her English proficiency was very low prior to moving to the US.

Criteria for participant selection

The participant in this case study was selected through opportunistic convenience sampling (Duff, 2007, p. 114). I met Grace a year before the beginning of the study through mutual friends, while I was a graduate student at the same institution. Because Grace and I shared several social connections (i.e., the mutual friends through which we

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3 The names reported in this study are pseudonyms in order to preserve participants’ privacy.
met) on multiple social networks, she started to appear in my own social media feeds, and it became clear to me that her complex L2 social media habits were a good example of the type of computer-mediated practices that scholars such as Thorne refer to (see discussion above); as a consequence, I felt that undertaking this study would give me, as well as other practitioners in the field, the understanding of students’ computer-mediated practices advocated by Thorne and Black (2008, see above).

**Materials**

Although the study didn’t require the use of any pedagogical or testing materials, it is opportune to describe the various social media environments that Grace was a part of. This section reports on key features of each social media tool, and describes the type of activities observed in the mobile activity log.

**Facebook**

Facebook is a service that allows users to create detailed multimedia profiles and connect with friends and other people that live and work around them. As of December 2012, over a billion users are members of the site (Fowler, 2012), making it the largest and most popular social network on earth. Additionally, more than half of those users access the social network through their mobile device (Sengupta, 2012).

Facebook’s two main features are the *Timeline* and the *Newsfeed*. The Timeline (Figure 1) is a profile page on which each user’s individual activity is organized and displayed; users can customize its content, but the layout (the container) is strictly defined by the website. The Newsfeed, on the other hand, is a page that displays activity

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4 Readers can visit www.facebook.com/about/timeline to see the Timeline in action.
that is “relevant” (according to a proprietary algorithm) for a certain user, in chronological order; in other words, it keeps users updated on what is happening in their social circle.

Figure 1. My own Facebook Timeline on a desktop browser.

In addition to customizing their own Timeline, users can post status updates (short written excerpts), pictures, videos, and links; they can add other users as friends; they can forward activity from other social media and web apps (such as blogs, Twitter, Instagram, and even their running tracker) automatically to their Timeline; they can post content on their friends’ Timelines; they can send private messages to their circle of friends; they can check-in (notify their circle of friends that they are at a particular location); they can join groups based on common interest; they can like someone else’s activity (that is, give positive feedback) and leave comments on it; and they can share (that is, re-post) anything they want on their own timeline (and therefore to their own friends’ Newsfeeds as well). Although this is an accurate description of Facebook’s
current layout (as of January 2013), features and functionalities are added and updated frequently. In addition, Facebook offers a fully functional smartphone app, which allows users to access their Timeline, Newsfeed, and all of the other features available on the web application (shown in Figure 2).

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2.** My own Newsfeed (first two samples) and Timeline (last sample) on Facebook's mobile app.

**Twitter**

Twitter is a microblogging service that allows users to publish short (140 characters) text entries, called *tweets*, and visualize other users’ tweets in a real-time, chronological feed. In addition to the feed, users have individual profiles that include a profile picture, a banner, and a short bio. Based on one’s pattern of activity (such as frequent word use and accounts one chooses to follow), Twitter offers personalized recommendations (the “Discover” feature) that are meant to enhance one’s Twitter experience (see Figure 3). Recently, Twitter went through a major update that allows users to embed pictures and links directly in a tweet. Due to its simplicity and
intuitiveness, Twitter is a very popular social network, with over 500 million users as of 2012 and over 340 million tweets daily (Dugan, 2012).

Profiles on Twitter are, by default, public (although they can be set to private if a user wishes to). Users can follow other users (and see others’ tweets on their own feed) and they can re-tweet (that is, pass on to their own followers) others’ posts; potentially, this can lead to a single tweet being read by millions of users around the world.

Tumblr

Tumblr (pronounced “tumbler”) is a blogging service that allows users to create and share text, audio, video, and photo entries. As of December 2012, it had over 88 million users and averaged almost 90 million posts per day (Tumblr, n.d.). The unique feature of this site comes from the creators’ attempt to make blogging more social by integrating features such as re-blogging, liking, and the dashboard (the Tumblr equivalent of the Facebook Newsfeed and the Twitter feed – see Figure 4), where users can collect entries posted and re-blogged by other Tumblr users they subscribe to.
Figure 4. My own Tumblr Dashboard.

**Instagram**

Instagram is a mobile-based photo-sharing service that has garnered popularity and a broad base of active users in the past two years by focusing on intuitiveness of user interface as well as by being the first application to provide a quality product that would fill an existing need: that of enabling users to share pictures elegantly and effortlessly from their phones. As of September 2012, the service had 100 million users (Taylor, 2012), over 4 billion pictures had been uploaded, and upwards of 5 million pictures were added each day (Honigman, 2012).

Instagram allows users to take pictures and apply different filters (as shown in Figure 5) in order to change the picture’s appearance; then, pictures are automatically uploaded to the Instagram network and visualized by one’s followers on their individual feeds. Like Twitter, Instagram profiles are public by default, and one only has to tap a
button to start following a user s/he is interested in following. Furthermore, pictures can be geo-tagged (that is, linked to a specific location and grouped with every other picture taken in the same location) and forwarded to other services such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr, Foursquare, and via email. What makes Instagram unique is its focus on mobile photography: even though pictures can be viewed through a web-based browser, they can only be posted through the mobile app.

![Figure 5. The Instagram Filter feature (before and after).](image)

**Mobile Phone**

The mobile phone used by Grace during the study is an HTC One X (displayed in Figure 6). This Android-powered smartphone features Wi-Fi and LTE data connections, an 8MP camera, and a 4.7-inch display, among other characteristics. The phone was priced in the $500-$600 price range at the time of release (April 2012), with the price decreasing to $199 when purchased with a two-year contract. While smartphones of all price ranges (including free ones) share the features that are relevant to this study (such
as touch display, internet connectivity, camera, and ability to run social media apps), this particular device belongs to the higher end of the smartphone market.

![HTC One X](image)

Figure 6. The HTC One X.

**Other activity**

In addition to the social networks described above, Grace used her phone to call and have one-on-one or small group private conversations through her personal and school email addresses, as well as private one-on-one SMS (text message) exchanges. Even though current texting applications allow exchanges to be longer than the usual 160 characters by piecing several text messages together, the medium does not allow for the same flexibility granted by email exchanges.
Procedure

The study methodology was informed by the literature above, as well as the results from a preliminary pilot study. Data were collected through four in-depth interviews, extensive social media monitoring and observation, and a log of mobile phone activities. After all the data were collected, they were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (see analysis section below).

Pilot study

The present study builds on a small case study conducted as part of a graduate class on Computer-assisted Language Learning. In that study, I sought to investigate the mismatch between students’ negative attitudes towards mobile-based language learning activities (see Stockwell, 2010 above) and their otherwise positive attitude towards the platform in general. I did so by asking Grace to keep a log of her mobile use through the course of a week, and by conducting two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with her. From this relatively small amount of data, I drew the following tentative conclusions:

Traditional, teacher-initiated activities centered around the transmission of and interaction with predefined sets of learning materials may not be the best use of a platform that seems to be inextricably connected with communication, social networking, identity construction and projection, and the perpetuation of “channels of interest” and “affinity groups” (Lam, 2006, p. 219). On the other hand, this admonition for what to not do could easily be turned into a positive indication: if the mobile platform itself is a catalyst for environments that foster the development of L2 identity, social interaction, and cultural and linguistic proficiency, CALL practitioners and educators should endeavor to create materials, applications and scenarios that encourage this kind of informal and incidental learning on the mobile platform.

In addition to enabling me to answer my research questions, the opportunity of analyzing Grace’s mobile use showed me that there were phenomena that went beyond her mobile
phone use and that were exemplary of her ways to come to terms with her second language and culture and to present herself to a watching world. These phenomena had to do largely with her complex use of social media.

For this reason, I set out to conduct a more comprehensive study that focused on social media practices and included behavioral data from multiple platforms.

**Data collection procedure**

The data presented in this study were collected during the summer and fall 2012 semesters (from late July through early December). I used mobile activity logs, social media monitoring, and in-depth interviews to capture both visible social media behaviors across platforms and underlying attitudes.

After obtaining IRB approval, I contacted Grace and explained the reasons for the study. She expressed interest in participating, and so I met with her and explained in detail what her contribution would be. After she signed the consent form, I conducted a first interview in order to gather general information regarding her background, her use of social media, and of mobile technologies. The interview session was also useful for discussing the most practical way to maintain a mobile activity log: in fact, whereas during the pilot study Grace had kept the log on a Google Docs spreadsheet that she accessed directly through her phone, we realized that that method was too time-consuming and we decided that it would be more practical to keep the log on paper.

Following the first interview, then, Grace was asked to keep a written log of her mobile activity for two fifteen-day periods, one in August and one in September; in this document, she logged time, location, duration, type (that is, application or tool used) and purpose (the motivation she felt at the time) of the activity (see Figure 7).
As explained above, Grace kept this log on a printed table I provided her with, which allowed her to have it within reach at all times and fill it out after each mobile phone use, minimizing the risk of her forgetting to log her activity. Furthermore, the fact that she was able to add an entry in this document right after each occurrence (rather than at the end of the day), increased the validity of this document: this measure prevented the student from forgetting to add entries, and from forgetting specific details that surrounded each occurrence of mobile use.

Social media use was tracked through profile monitoring: I linked my profiles to Grace’s (by adding her as a friend on Facebook and by following her public profiles on Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram), I periodically monitored them, and took notes on her activity throughout the semester. Additionally, I accessed Grace’s Facebook Activity Log to collect data regarding activity that could not be easily observed on her Timeline (for example, whenever she liked or commented on someone’s activity – see Figure 8). I did
this for three two-week periods (beginning of August, beginning of September, and end of October) in order to get a representative sample of her activity throughout the semester.

![Figure 8. A sample of the data obtained from the Facebook Activity Log.](image)

Lastly, I conducted three more interviews with Grace: one at the end of August, one at the end of September, and one at the end of the semester. Each of these interviews lasted between 10 and 30 minutes and focused on relevant behaviors and trends observed through the mobile activity log and social media monitoring.

**Analysis**

A relevant sample of Grace’s social media activity, along with the transcribed interview data and the activity log, were coded and categorized inductively. In general, I tried not to let my preconceived notion influence the coding and categorizing processes, but rather I let relevant themes emerge from the data. When analyzing the mobile activity log, though, I did use Kukulska-Hulme's (2010) categorization of mobile uses outlined
above to as a model for my own, adding Kramsch et al.'s (2000) concepts of agency to designate instances when the student was projecting her own identity or self-representation. Categories emerged from the data are discussed in the next chapter.

**Establishing reliability of coding**

When data are interpreted and coded by the researcher, it is important to take steps to ensure that researcher bias does not let the researcher produce conclusions that are unwarranted by the data (Chapelle & Duff, 2003). At the same time it must be understood that, in qualitative research, the traditional conceptualization of reliability of findings is not as applicable as it would be in quantitative research. Duff (2007), building her case on Merriam’s (1998) argument, discusses this at length, and points out that, in interpretive qualitative research such as the present study, one researcher may see, frame, and interpret reality differently than another, and argues that it may be unreasonable to expect that different researchers should always arrive at the same results when looking at the same case and using the same methods. With this in mind, she suggests that case study reports should be compiled in a way that “makes sense” to readers, and that “audit trails”, or detailed discussions of the decision-making process, along with the data, should be made available to the readers in order to give them an opportunity to understand the researcher’s conclusions.

For the present study, a second coder was employed to ensure that researcher bias would be avoided. Since the data collected was heterogeneous, the coder analyzed 30% (10 days) of the Mobile Activity Log, 50% of the social media outlets (two out of four social networks), and 25% of the interview transcripts (one interview), ensuring that Mackey and Gass' (2005) recommendation of using 15%-20% of the data be met.
The second coder followed the same coding procedures used by the first coder (as described above). The two coders had a 97.2% agreement on the Mobile Activity Log categorization. For the interview transcripts and the social media monitoring, which lack finite instances to be categorized but rather are dynamic, multifaceted, and contextual, the two raters compared high-order observations and categories that emerged after inspecting the data; these were found to be in close agreement with each other.
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The fact that Grace is a prolific user of social media was confirmed by the quantity and quality of the data collected, which shed light on the research questions that this study aimed to answer. In this chapter, I discuss each question in turn, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the data, and I will show how both aspects contribute in providing a detailed description of Grace’s social media and mobile habits.

Use of social media

The first research question asked how Grace used social media applications while enrolled in an US institution. From the data, it is possible to see that Grace uses each social network differently, but these social networks are not mutually exclusive: rather, their uses sometimes overlap. Her behavior confirms that each environment has its own purpose and culture-of-use that serves or conflicts with Grace’s own purposes. What follows is a detailed description of her habits for each of the social networks she is a part of.

Facebook

Facebook is by far Grace’s preferred social network. On it, she engages in numerous and wide-ranging activities: Table 1 shows the number of daily instances for each type of activity, on average, as observed in data collected for three different two-week periods (a total of 46 days) between the beginning of August and the end of October 2012.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of activity</th>
<th>Daily occurrences</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Likes</td>
<td>8.35</td>
<td>39.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures uploaded</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentions/tags</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts received</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profile Updates</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other activity</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21.09</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Daily averages of Grace’s Facebook activity.

The data shows that Grace uses Facebook very often: in fact, she performs over 20 actions each day, on average. This number includes a mix of productive activities (posting pictures, updating her status, liking and writing comments on others’ activities, and sharing links) and other events such as being mentioned or tagged in others’ posts, which were included because they represent interactions that are initiated by others. Actions such as browsing her Newsfeed or others’ Timelines were not included because such activity is not recorded on Facebook’s Activity Log. Nonetheless, we can assume that Grace spends a consistent amount of time browsing her Newsfeed and her friends’ Timelines because she wouldn’t be able to comment on others’ activities otherwise.

Grace confirmed this observation in several occasions. When asked how many times she logs on Facebook each day, she replied:

A day? You know, I don’t log in anymore, that page is there [laughs]... uh... anyway, I probably check it... uh, if I’m in class, during school time, I check it every class, at least, and then if I come back at night, the page is there, like, the whole time. I’m not necessarily staring at it the whole time, but I keep the tab open (Interview, December 28th, 2012).
Looking at her Facebook activity more closely, we can see that Grace uses Facebook mostly to interact with her friends. Facebook becomes the arena where events are planned (through conversations that can be private or public, as well as one-on-one or in group, and that are often facilitated by Facebook’s Event functionality); significant moments are then shared in real-time as they happen (through updates, check-ins, and pictures); afterwards, these moments are re-lived and reflected upon collectively (through likes, comments, and shares). Unlike Almon (the Chinese teenager in Lam’s study described above), Grace does not usually interact online with people she doesn’t know offline; in fact, most of the friends with whom she regularly interacts on Facebook are friends that live in the town where her university is located, and that she sees frequently. For Grace, Facebook is a tool used to extend time together and, in a sense, emancipate friendships from the necessity of being in the same place.

Besides using Facebook to communicate and interact with her friends, Grace uses it to keep up with her friends’ lives and to get to know them better:

It’s a new way of communicating with your friends, you know? Stalking friends, or whatever... seeing people’s pictures, like for example if my friend is in like, China or UK or wherever, I’m not gonna be able to see them, but if they post pictures on Facebook I’ll know, oh, here! You travelled to this city, or here! You are in a relationship... it’s a way of knowing people (Interview, December 28th, 2012).

The concept of stalking does not, of course, have negative connotations, but it refers to the act of accessing a friend’s personal information that was willingly shared with the understood purpose of allowing their own audience to know them better.

What is the nature of these exchanges? Knowing that Grace is a Chinese student who is fluent in both English and Chinese, one would expect her to use both languages on
Facebook. In reality, this is not the case: while she may see her friends post in a variety of languages, including Chinese, Grace’s production and interactions are virtually always carried out in English, even when her interlocutors speak Chinese (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. One of Grace's sample status updates and consequent comments

Figure 9 shows one of Grace’s status updates as displayed on her Timeline. Immediately below it are buttons that allow viewers to like, comment on, and share this particular update, and below those buttons are the comments that other users have posted. Two observation can be made: first, one simple status update can generate a significant amount of feedback, both in terms of non-verbal feedback (18 users liked the post) and
verbal feedback (7 comments). Second, comments can consist of simple responses to the original status (turns 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7) but can also generate conversations (turns 3 through 5, with turn 4 being posted by Grace in response to turn 3). It is also worth noting that this interaction involved both native speakers (four) and non-native speakers (two).

While each update will generate different amounts and types of interaction, the one represented in Figure 9 is by no means atypical; and, although this example may not seem very substantial, one must take into consideration the fact that a user like Grace will participate in interactions like these, on average, well over a dozen times a day (including all levels of participation, from liking to writing the original post), as shown in Table 1.

At this point it would be useful to compare the amount of activity performed by Grace with other existing data that quantifies international students’ participation on social networks. Mitchell (2012) calculated students’ levels of participation on Facebook by multiplying the estimated number of times a user logged in each month by the number of friends (social connections) a user has on Facebook. Her top participant, in this sense, was Nina, who was considered as having a high level of participation because she logged in 100 or more times a month (over three times a day) and had 238 friends, for a participation score (indicating the number of potential interactions per month) of 23,800 (Mitchell, 2012, p. 474). How could we classify Grace based on these criteria? She began the study with 490 friends and, at the time of writing, has reached 540 friends; furthermore, from the excerpt reported above it is obvious that she interacts with Facebook much more often than 100 times a week: the best way to describe this aspect of her Facebook use is, in fact, that she is *always on* (Baron, 2008). In my opinion, then, and
to expand on Mitchell’s (2012) language, Grace should be classified as a *super-user* of Facebook, with a number of potential interactions well over 100,000 per month.

While this is likely explained by the fact that Grace has been in the US for three years (as opposed to Mitchell’s participants, who were all in their first year in the US), there remains the fact that, at this point, Grace uses Facebook very frequently (we will return to this point later). This, then, begs the question: how did Grace go from being a non-user to being a super-user? Data shown in Table 2 reveal that her move to the US and the consequent interaction with individuals in this new local context was a determining factor in this surge of Facebook activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th># of friends</th>
<th># of actions</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Moved to the U.S. on Dec. 30th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>142</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>118</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Took a break from Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>164</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>≈600</td>
<td>Estimate based on average</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Changes in Grace’s Facebook activity due to her move to the U.S.

Table 2 shows that Grace joined Facebook well before coming to the United States, but was never really interested in using it until she made the move. After the
move, which happened in the last week of December 2009, her number of friends and monthly actions steadily increased, and the data show a trend that culminates in the current amount of 540 friends and an average of 600 monthly actions. In a conversation with Grace, she told me that at some point before moving to the US she had almost forgotten about having a Facebook account but that, upon arrival, some of her new friends (at a New Year’s Eve party) asked her whether she ‘was on’ Facebook. She immediately remembered about it, logged on the service again, and added her new acquaintances to her profile, eager to make some American friends (fittingly, a lot of the posts found on her Timeline during the first couple of months in 2010 are of the “It was very nice to see/meet you” variety). Grace saw this occurrence as an opportunity for her to be exposed to more language and begin to understand her host culture, and embraced Facebook enthusiastically. Since then, her Facebook membership has grown and evolved, and has become a constant presence in her life.

**Twitter**

Between August 1st and December 1st, Grace tweeted 615 times, averaging just above 5 tweets each day, although this number keeps into account the fact that all of her Tumblr posts (172) and some of her Instagram posts were forwarded to Twitter.

Grace regularly performs all available types of action on Twitter. She posts status updates (such as quotes, songs she is listening to, or random snippets of information concerning her daily life) and pictures (see Figure 10); she writes *direct replies* addressing a single Twitter user (but that are still public and visible to anyone); she retweets other users’ posts; and she forwards activity from other social networks (mostly Instagram and Tumblr) to her Twitter account in order to broaden her audience.
As was the case for Facebook, Grace checks Twitter every day. Unlike Facebook, though, Twitter is not used solely to keep in touch with friends, but also for keeping up to date with news and as a source of relevant and interesting information. This becomes clear after taking a look at the list of users that Grace follows: out of the 95 users in her following list, 55 are public accounts of personalities (e.g. actors, spiritual leaders, the President of the United States), businesses (e.g. brands such as *Chanel*, *Fossil*, and *Versace*), institutions (e.g. *Harvard University*) and single-purpose public accounts that she is interested in (e.g. *Funny Tweets!*, *Daily Bible Verse*, and *Quotier*, which tweets uplifting quotes every day); the remaining 40 accounts are friends that she knows personally. As one might suspect, the vast majority of direct replies are directed to the latter, while retweets usually consist of posts from those users she doesn’t know personally; the significance of this habit will be discussed below.

It is significant to note that, as was the case with her Facebook connections, all these accounts write exclusively in English and discuss matters that are relevant mostly to
the American context, although some of them are more international in scope; in the same way, all of Grace’s own production on Twitter is in English, as shown by the samples in Figure 10.

A linguistic feature that is prominent in Grace’s Twitter feed is the frequent use of hashtags, a feature in which words preceded by the symbol “#” become tags that are used to categorize tweets; using these tags in a search query would then display all tweets tagged under a particular topic. Figure 11 shows a tweet of mine tagged with #edchat and #langchat, two hashtags frequently used by language educators to share relevant content with others; Figure 12 shows an example of Grace’s use of hashtags.

Figure 11. A Tweet of mine displaying use of hashtags.

Figure 12. Grace's use of hashtags.

New hashtags are invented by users every day, and Twitter has a page dedicated to tracking the most frequently used tags at any given moment. This phenomenon, which can be observed on other social networks (e.g. Flickr or Instagram, albeit in slightly different forms), has been referred to as “folksonomy”, or the creation of taxonomies by the people (Barton & Lee, 2012).
In addition to allowing Grace to stay up to date on topics that matter to her, Twitter seems to have the capacity of relieving her of sudden urges to share all that is immediate and peculiar:

Twitter is fun, ‘cause sometimes, you know, I’m the kind of person who has all these weird ideas, and, if I tell everybody, I mean I can talk to my friends, of course but when I’m on the bus, I can’t just grab random people and tell them “hey guess what, I ate a toast for breakfast!” They’re gonna kick me off the bus... so... yeah, I guess sometimes Twitter is just kind of like, talking to myself, not really, but talking to your imaginary friends, online, which you probably don’t ever know, and it doesn’t really matter, ‘cause I don’t care who’s gonna read it, I’ll just tweet ‘cause I think it’s funny, or I think it’s weird, or I think I have this weird idea just stuck in my head and I have to free it (Interview, August 31st, 2012).

On another occasion, when explaining what was and wasn’t worthy of being posted on Facebook, she confirmed this idea by recounting one of the ways in which a certain post of hers may end up on Twitter rather than on Facebook:

...but I don’t post things like... ok, sometimes I do, like if I [hadn’t] woke up at 8 am in forever, maybe I’ll do that, ‘cause it’s like, a milestone for everyone to see, but if I.... like.... I walk down and saw a rabbit I wouldn’t post that on my Timeline, because... that’s something for Twitter I guess [laughs] (Interview, December 28th, 2012).

It is clear, then, that over time each social network has developed a specific culture-of-use for Grace (Thorne, 2003), and that Twitter has less of an association with her community of friends than Facebook does, although this “community connection” is not completely absent, as shown by the fact that her following list includes a number of personal connections.
Between August 1st and December 1st, Grace posted on Tumblr 172 times (1.4 posts/day), and liked 260 posts from other users (2.1 likes/day). As readers may recall from the previous chapter, Tumblr is a blogging service: does this mean that Grace produced a substantial amount of text every day?

Hardly. The reality is, not a single one of those entries is an essay, or even a paragraph: mostly they are images, quotes, and animations that she re-blogged (sometimes adding a comment) from other Tumblr users. In fact, it turns out that Grace conceptualizes the idea of “blog post” much differently that a writing teacher would:

Tumblr is a cool website. ‘Cause... it’s kind of like a blog... people use blogs, right? Everybody does... I mean not everybody... a lot of people does, cool kids do... uh, it’s just like, Tumblr is the place where they have cool quotes, design, pictures, things I am interested in and I can just follow, when I think it’s cool I reblog it, it’s just like a blog. So I do that a lot because... I think writing a blog is fun, as long as you’re not doing it for your English class, ‘cause I did that this summer, that was horrible [laughs]... so, being not forced to write a blog is actually fun, ‘cause it’s a way of writing, kind of recording your life, basically, so I do that a lot (Interview, August 31st, 2012).

Two things are apparent from the quote above: first, “blogging” as understood by Grace looks a lot more like keeping a scrapbook than keeping a journal; and second, Grace is still discussing this in terms of writing and recording one’s life, although she doesn’t write, and there are no references to her life on her blog page (in fact, a lot of that information can be found on her Facebook profile instead). In a sense, Grace is showing who she is by what she likes, what she collects, what she finds humorous, pretty, inspirational, and worthy of being shared; browsing her blog roll feels a lot like peeking into one’s scrapbook, something one makes for oneself, but that reveals more about that person than a self-descriptive essay ever could. Her intended audience is herself alone
and everyone else at the same time; if others see it, they see it, “if they don’t, they don’t. I see it” (Interview, August 31st, 2012).

This course of action is typical of current online social discourse, and it is usually referred to as curating the web (Morin, 2011). In general, curating refers to the act of giving positive feedback to the creators of certain content, while at the same time sharing it to the user’s own audience. Such actions have different names and specific features depending on which platforms they take place (“like” and “share” on Facebook, “favorite” and “re-tweet” on Twitter, and “like” and “re-blog” on Tumblr, as well as sharing externally created content such as URLs and videos), and linguistically fall in between passive acts (such as reading and listening) and active acts (such as writing and speaking). This act is, in a sense, the logical next step to social bookmarking (Sykes et al., 2008, p. 533), and is significant because it allows information consumers to display their own attempt at selecting and organizing the otherwise unmanageable quantity of information present on the internet. As they curate the web, users communicate what is important to them, and by doing so they create a representation of themselves consisting of a puzzle of others’ creations. Curating, then, is a way for individuals to develop their own identity.

As we have seen above, Grace uses Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr (to differing degrees) to curate the web and, by doing so, communicates to her audience who she is and what is important for her. In addition, it was observed that she used these three social networks (again, to differing degrees) to engage with her own passions and interests; in other words, she found and followed friends, public personalities, and other users that produced posts that were likely to interest her. Whenever she was bored, had extra time
on her hands, or wanted to stay up to date on a particular topic, she used these social networks to access tidbits of relevant information. In her case, the themes running through her Twitter and Tumblr feeds had to do with style, fashion, design, innovative and interesting images, humor, sports, as well as other public profiles that she described as “random interests” (such as MacDonald’s, several National Parks, Harvard, Jeep, and the official Iowa State Twitter channel). She treated these channels as a way to stay abreast with events that mattered to her, but she never felt that she necessarily had to read every single entry; rather, she focused on the most recent posts and sampled from the feeds according to her mood at the moment. Again, all of the users she followed posted in English, and as a consequence anything that ended up on her blog was in English as well. This reinforces the observation that, for Grace, activities on the mobile platform are bound to her present cultural and linguistic context.

**Instagram**

Between August 1st and December 1st, Grace posted 47 pictures on Instagram (or roughly a picture every 3 days). She is relatively new to this social network, having begun to use it only in April, and doesn’t seem to be as enthusiastic about it as she is about the other social networks she uses. The main reason for this lack of enthusiasm seems to be the fact that Grace can’t find any value-added features compared to other networks she already belongs to:

Instagram is a weird thing. I didn’t like it when I started. My friends forced me to use that, so I did, I saw some cool pictures, and I think it was fun, so I did it for a while, now I have like 90-something pictures on there, which is actually quite a lot compared to a lot of people, and then I stopped doing it because I forget, I simply forget... I mean I like to see cool pictures, but I have Tumblr already, I’ve got a lot of pictures and those kinds of things on Tumblr, too, so... I stopped.
I am not using Instagram to interact with other people a lot ‘cause I feel like Instagram is just a thing where you show others what you’re doing while you don’t really care if other people see it, and you don’t really have conversation. I mean sometimes you do, but normally less, less than Facebook.

If I have a picture from a party, or something I want to show my friends, and I want to talk about it, I may post it on Facebook, and we can just have a conversation afterwards... but Instagram is “I took a cool picture, I can post it on Facebook, hey I can post it on Instagram too!”, like that [laughs] (Interview, August 31st, 2012).

If we were to analyze this situation through the lenses of Van House’s (2007) typology of image sharing purposes, it would become clear that there is a conflict between Grace’s purpose and the network’s main purpose. In fact, while she is mainly concerned with maintaining distant closeness with those in her virtual community, and is trying to use Instagram to accomplish that purpose, the reality is that Instagram, which has an interface that favors image editing and promotion, seems to be designed to better accommodate photo exhibition purposes; features that would encourage conversation around pictures (highly valued by Grace) are not as functional, and are certainly not as good as those available on Facebook, for example.

There is no doubt that Grace prefers to post pictures on Facebook rather than Instagram, despite the fact that the latter is a social network dedicated solely to photography: while her Instagram production amounted to 47 pictures, in the same four months she uploaded 356 images on Facebook. This is another indicator that, for her, the purpose of uploading personal pictures is primarily that of nurturing friendships, promoting community interaction, and extending time together.
Use of mobile device

The second research question investigated Grace’s use of her mobile device to enhance her social media experience. The first step to answer this question was to analyze and categorize the occurrences logged in the Mobile Activity log. The following categories emerged during the classification of the log entries:

- **Communication:** Grace used her smartphone to participate in text-based conversations with friends, classmates, co-workers, supervisors, and instructors, both in a one-on-one and group fashion;

- **Distraction and Fun:** Grace used her mobile phone to get distracted when bored (even while at work or in class), to amuse or enjoy herself, or because she had developed a habit (for example, checking Twitter before going to bed);

- **Agency:** Grace used her mobile phone to participate in social networking activities; this includes passive acts (reading and skimming), curating, and active acts (posting content);

- **Reaction:** Grace reacted to notifications that kept her updated on current email, texting, and social networking activity;

- **Learning:** Grace used her mobile device to find out information;

- **Camera:** Grace used her device to take pictures.

It should be clear that the categories outlined above often overlap: for example, an occurrence initiated by a reaction to a notification, or as a habit, can turn into an instance of communication or agency. For this reason, each activity was assigned one or two categories, depending on the activity itself.
Table 3 shows the number of occurrences for each activity type (for the reason explained in the previous paragraph, the sum of all daily occurrences exceeds the total amount, and the sum of percentages exceeds 100%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of activity</th>
<th>Daily occurrences</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reaction</td>
<td>11.04</td>
<td>66.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>10.26</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camera</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distraction and Fun</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All activity</strong></td>
<td><strong>16.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Number of daily occurrences for each type of mobile activity.

These numbers clearly indicate that, for Grace, her mobile device is yet another means to the end of staying in touch with people around her. This is another illustration of Barton and Lee’s (2012) principle: the evolution of the technology leads to the development of existing practices and the formation of new ones. In Grace’s case, her mobile device allows her to communicate with others using voice, text, images, and social networking platforms.

When looking solely at activities that involve communication and social media (see Table 4) we discover that texting is Grace’s most frequent activity, followed by Facebook and Email. Other social networks are accessed less frequently from her mobile device, an observation that is in step with the frequency with which she uses these social
networks in general (it is important to note that these numbers refer to instances of
communication that were initiated both by Grace and other individuals).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Daily occurrences</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Texting</td>
<td>7.56</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Daily occurrences of mobile activities involving communication and social media.

These numbers may not entirely capture the weight of Grace’s mobile device’s
ctribution to her communication habit. How important is this tool for her?

[My phone] is... my friend. A really close friend. A friend that, if I don’t have it, I
will feel incomplete. It’s... yeah, if I don’t have my phone with me for... usually if
I have it, and it’s on the table, I may not check it every time... if I don’t have it,
and I’m out with friends, I’ll be like “Ah! Where’s my phone!” I’ll be freaking
out and I’ll panic, ‘cause like... I don’t know, it’s not that I am worried about if
anybody is trying to, like, reach me, it’s actually just... I think just part of my life,
and if I don’t have it I’m like “I can’t check Facebook, I can’t check Twitter, I
want to take pictures – oh crap, I don’t have my phone with me! And I want to
check in with my friends at this restaurant and – oh crap I don’t have my phone
with me!”... Yeah, it’s part of my life (Interview, July 26th, 2012).

I use Facebook and Twitter all the time, and in the past I could only do it with my
computer, but right now I can do it with my phone, so it’s just more convenient,
you feel like it’s something that you do all the time and now you can do it even
more, so you want to do it.

I wouldn’t live without a smartphone, it’s just not gonna work.

I use it a lot that I don’t even notice it, and it’s funny when I don’t have my
phone, like the day when I lost my phone I was just like [sighs] had a panic attack
or something, I was like how am I gonna do this? I guess that’s something that I
didn’t realize before, like I didn’t realize I was so attached to it, it was really
funny to see it, I was like oh my gosh, I don’t have my phone, I’m feeling naked and everything. It’s weird (Interview, October 5th, 2012).

Given the importance that Grace gives to belonging to and staying in touch with her community of friends, these words should be no surprise. Just as her Facebook tab is always open when she is at home, her connection is always live when she is away from her computer:

I think most of time when I check my Facebook, email, or Twitter or this kind of stuff on my phone, a lot of times when I am on bus, when I’m out, when I don’t have my computer with me, I’ll check them, really it’s still really easy, but when I’m at home or on campus when I have my laptop with me, it’s easier to check it with my laptop ‘cause I’m gonna use it anyway, just like open another tab. (Interview, October 5th, 2012).

Her mobile device makes all of her networks conveniently available whenever Grace needs or wants to access them. She observed that she often used her phone “for fun”, “for habit”, or because she was “bored”; furthermore, she explained that she often browsed Twitter and Tumblr on the bus, at the bus stop, at school, or even in class.

The data, then, show that Grace’s mobile device plays a very important role in her life, and this role is centered around its ability of allowing her to be connected to her social circles at all times.
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

At this point, it is important to step back from the substantial amount of data collected and identify overarching themes that can be used as a springboard to discuss the importance of the findings as well as their relevance for language teaching and learning, as this is the main purpose behind the present study. This chapter provides a summary of the main findings, their connection to language learning and teaching, as well as a discussion of the study’s limitations and ideas for future research.

Main findings

A few overarching themes emerge from the data reported above. Grace exhibited a rich and complex array of activities that are carried out with awareness of her purposes and of each tool’s culture-of-use. In particular, the data portrays a student that has a desire to cultivate meaningful friendships, to project her identity to the external world, and to learn about her host culture, and has developed enough familiarity with the language and the tools to do so effectively. As stated in the introduction, we can conclude that Grace maintains a sophisticated and dynamic presence on the web: sophisticated, because culture-of-use awareness leads to the formation of different habits for different tools; and dynamic, because these habits are shaped by Grace’s purposes and the context in which she finds herself.

The clearest finding of this study is that Grace uses social media to develop existing friendships. Time and time again, she discussed and demonstrated that maximizing interaction with her English-speaking friends was one of her priorities, and
that she saw social media as great tools to accomplish her goals. What is more, it became clear that social networks can be used as common grounds to strengthen new or budding relationships in the same ways that spending more time together would:

I think when you actually show people you are willing to do what they are doing, it’s more likely you guys are gonna become friends, ‘cause people are gonna look for similarities among people, so you become friends after that, “oh! She does the same thing, like I do that too! Maybe we can just be friends!” I’m not saying that other international students are not doing that, I think they do it less, and it sends out a wrong idea to other people, ‘cause people think, like, we can’t be friends, ‘cause we don’t even know what to talk about, we don’t do the same thing—

**Interviewer:** It’s hard to find a connection.

**Grace:** Yeah, I use Twitter, and you don’t. I mean we have like, Chinese Twitter and stuff, but, American people are not gonna be able to read that ([Interview, August 31st, 2012](Interview, August 31st, 2012)).

The second conclusion that can be drawn from the data is that Grace is intentionally maintaining a true picture of herself on her social networks, and she is using English to do so. As mentioned above, Almon, the Chinese teenage immigrant in Lam’s (2000) study, developed separate “textual or rhetorical [online] identities that are related but different from [his biographical identity]” (p. 474); this could be due to the fact that the online community he was interacting with was different than and separated from his “real life” community, and thus encouraged the development of a different identity. In contrast, Grace is consciously creating one identity for herself online, and she believes this identity to be a fair and true representation of who she really is; in other words, there is no mismatch between her “real life” and online identities. She explained it this way, when asked what kind of person she was online:

Mostly same. There are some things I may not post online, just because I feel it’s kind of too personal to be shown to other people, and there will also be some things that I will post online but I will not show everybody I meet... it’s basically
still the same person but it’s like the information we... it’s like what we do in our
daily life, some information you will share with your roommates, but not other
people, some things you may talk to your friends, but not this person, it’s just like
that. But, like, Facebook and online stuff is like, basically like a group you choose
(Interview, August 31\textsuperscript{st}, 2012).

On the one hand, she is constantly working on projecting an L2 online identity that is
representative of her biographical identity; on the other, she is being mindful of privacy
and other issues that could arise from sharing too much information.

Projecting an identity, it turns out, doesn’t necessarily involve writing about
oneself: curating the web proved to be a practice that helped Grace show what she is like,
what she is interested in, and what she finds valuable without having to create elaborate
content from scratch. This scrapbooking-like activity is a complex one because it entails
three different steps: browsing through a great quantity of material, identifying content
that is deemed worthy of being reposted (and therefore identified with), and publishing it
on a social network in a way that is organized and appropriate (that is, with an awareness
of audience, context, and each tool’s culture-of-use). As they curate the web, users
communicate what is important to them, and in doing so they create a representation of
themselves consisting of a puzzle of others’ creations.

The value-added benefit of maximizing interaction with English-speaking social
circles and of engaging in practices such as curating is, ultimately, an increased
awareness of and interaction with the language itself and its pragmatics, social customs,
and cultural constructs that can only be beneficial to an English language learner
(Matsumura, 2001; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Grace is an outgoing and sociable person,
and likes to meet new people; she is very open to learn about her host culture, and does
not think that spending all her time with fellow Chinese students would be the best use of
her time here. In fact, she reports that most of her friends here are Americans or international students from other countries. In the same way, social media in is, for her, a “virtual place” that allows her to extend the physical places in which she meets new friends and maximize her socialization and learning opportunities. When asked whether social media helped her understand her American friends and culture better, she said:

Yeah, totally. Like I said, you learn about other people’s lives, you learn about a pattern, like, you are learning your environment, yeah... Culture too. Whatever like... uh, culture, design, language, or just how you can or cannot interact with people (Interview, August 31\(^{st}\), 2012).

Being on social media is like being with friends, and being with friends is the best way to learn about them and their way of life. For someone like Grace, who is intrinsically motivated to learn about her host culture, social media is a treasure trove of opportunities and information.

**Implications for language development**

What is the relationship between these findings and language development? The common denominator in all of the themes discussed above is Grace’s conscious decision to carry out social media practices using English. This choice is seen in the fact that she uses only English to address her audience and that, as an audience member herself, she is seeking out sources that use that same language. Here is an illustration of social media’s affordances for language learning: by connecting individuals in the ways described above (and more), social media becomes a platform for consistent access to *authentic* language use and affords ESL students like Grace a chance to engage in *authorship* and *agency* (see discussion of Kramsch et al. (2000) above).
Grace’s experiences and perspectives provide an indication that, by offering a platform for meaningful interaction, participation in social media can foster the development of a learner’s identity and confidence; this reasoning agrees with Lam’s (2000) conclusion in the sense that “[it] compels us as TESOL practitioners and researchers to reconsider the significance of identity formation in the process of learning to read and write in an L2” (p. 476). Although she doesn’t consider herself perfectly fluent in English, Grace is a confident communicator. Yet, this confidence came only over time:

I remember the first year I was here, the first semester, when I was replying my friends’ messages, I would actually have to think about what to write, ‘cause I don’t know, I think by then maybe I just didn’t know them that well, I was sometimes just being careful about what I would be saying, or like whether or not they can understand me... like that. But now it’s just like, whatever.

*Interviewer:* So... what gave you this confidence now?

*Grace:* I think conversations with friends, like, just, throughout the year, school year, and also Facebook, like, Facebook is pretty much like that, like texting on laptop or website page or whatever, it’s just like that, I think.... I think it’s just how language is, you use it and you get used to it, and you just learn. ‘Cause for me, like, I know a lot of students who learned English before they came here, they spent so many years learning English, learning grammar and stuff, but that’s not my case... I just didn’t care, like, I just don’t like learning stuff, like, sitting in class and taking notes, I just don’t like that, I like to be in it, and just like... I don’t know, experience or feel it or whatever, just kind of like be in the situation to learn it (Interview, August 31st, 2012).

From her words, it seems that participating in online interaction was a powerful positive factor in the development of her communicative confidence.

Perhaps more importantly, this study’s findings should be kept into account by SLA researchers and practitioners that desire to develop instructional materials meant to engage language learners through social media. In particular, the practices of curating the
web and of categorizing it through the use of tags seem to hold pedagogical potential and should be explored further. Curating, for example, entails evaluating content in relation to a standard determined by the user, as well as organizing and delivering the content that matches or exceeds that standard in a way that keeps into account one’s audience, context, and purpose. All of these skills are important in academia, and are frequently part of writing courses’ syllabi: could web curating be utilized to teach these skills? Similarly, tagging content involves correct interpretation of content as well as the creation and correct application of categories to such content, which are basic building blocks of learning.

This study concurs with Lam (2000) in bringing our attention to an alternative view of communication that should be at least taken into consideration as a complement to the traditional, “information transmission” view of communication that seems to be prevalent in our culture and teaching: the ritual view of communication (Carey, 1988, as cited in Lam, 2000, p. 476). Such a view “sees communication as directed toward the formation of social relations and shared beliefs, and sees language as a symbolic process for creating, maintaining, or transforming social reality” (Lam, 2000, p. 477). Grace demonstrated that engaging in this type of communication was very beneficial to the development of her identity and proficiency, but that she did so completely out of her own desire; it may be possible that many of her peers may be missing out on the benefits she experienced because of shyness or a lack of tools, awareness or of an initial “push” towards those experiences. At a moment when mobile technologies are becoming affordable and ubiquitous, then, educators should consider how to encourage this kind of communication among language learners, especially for those learners who find
themselves in a new cultural and linguistic context and need our support to engage with it. How exactly to do this, though, remains to be determined; so far, results have been mixed, with cultural background and language learning orientations playing a major role in determining students’ willingness to engage in online social activity, and their perception of it (see the discussion of Reinhardt & Zander, 2011 above).

Limitations

The present study is not without limitations. One issue that needs to be addressed is that of the typicality of the case study’s participant; in other words, is Grace’s use of social media in line with what other international students do, or is she an outlier? Obviously, the answer to such a question would change the way in which we interpret the data. At this point, we cannot know for certain what is typical or atypical precisely because there aren’t any studies to confirm or dispute the notion of typicality in terms of social media participation. In fact, while the participant in Mitchell’s (2012) study all reported lower level of participation than Grace, one must remember that those students were in their first year in the US and that their participation was measured at a single moment in time. As Table 2 (see previous chapter) shows, Grace’s level of Facebook participation during her first semester was comparable with that of those students in Mitchell’s (2012) study that had a medium or high level of participation; it may be that those students experienced the same growth in participation that Grace did as time went by, although this conjecture should be verified by undertaking more longitudinal studies. So, if there is any conclusion we can draw from comparing the results of these two studies, it is that Grace’s use of social media may not be too far from that of other motivated international students.
This conclusion is supported from my own anecdotal evidence: although it cannot be said that all international students enrolled in US institutions use social media as much as Grace does, personal observations tell me that Grace is definitely not one of a kind; in other words, I have observed several other international students participate in social networks to a level comparable to that of Grace and of native speakers. Therefore, the fact that there was only one participant in the study was a real limitation in the sense that it prevented me from creating a more exhaustive picture of ESL students’ social media practices and habits; on the other hand, I would argue that the findings should not be dismissed on grounds of potential atypicality of the participant.

Additionally, there were data collection issues. Among them, the fact that several of my conclusions are based on self-reported data (such as the Mobile Activity log and interviews) is problematic; although social media monitoring confirmed trends that were identified in the logs and the interviews, the data may not precisely reflect Grace’s actual behavior. Also, it was not possible, for practical reasons, to measure the time she spent passively browsing her social media outlets, and so I had to rely on her account to gather information on this aspect of her social media use.

Lastly, as previously discussed, the nature of the study calls for careful interpretation on the part of readers, who are invited to analyze the environment described here and draw their own conclusions on what can or cannot be transferred.

**Suggestions for further study**

Many of the issues discussed in the limitation section could be turned on their head and used as the basis for future studies. In terms of typicality of the participant, for example, readers will recognize that Grace’s level of intrinsic motivation to participate in
meaningful interaction with native speakers may be higher than what is common among Chinese students in US institutions of higher educations (Lu & Hsu, 2008; MacIntyre, 2007). Therefore, there should be more detailed studies that analyze the effect of individual differences such as language-learning beliefs, motivation, and willingness to communicate on students’ use of social media; given the fact that each individual is different in these respects, it would be useful to understand which type of learner would benefit the most from the institutionally encouraged approach to social media advocated by Reinhardt, Thorne, and Zander (Reinhardt & Zander, 2011; Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008).

Also, as was mentioned previously, the study took place during Grace’s third year in the United States; by that point, her social media habits were fully developed. Although the Facebook Activity Log allowed me to observe the effect of the transition to the US on Grace’s level of participation, observing these events as they happen would give researcher much more insight on students’ attitudes and motivations. Further studies should observe international students for longer periods of time, especially during the transition to the US educational system, and investigate the ways in which these social media habits develop.

Lastly, the study revealed that ESL students engage in activities whose pedagogical potential has not yet been explored; besides studying the use of social media in the language classroom, studies should investigate the language-learning potential of specific practices such as curating and folksonomy, both in terms of effectiveness of training on students’ willingness to engage in them, and in order to measure their impact on language and identity development.
REFERENCES


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