Fandom and Online Interest Groups

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Abstract

Within the scope of technology for language education, fandom and online interest communities encompass a range of affinity groups in which individuals can develop skills and knowledge potentially supporting language learning or language mastery relevant to use in online and offline contexts. Initial work on online interest groups investigated individual and collaborative literacy practices and identity development among users of pre-Web 2.0 technologies such as Usenet discussions and personal fan websites. More recent research on online interest groups, language learning and use looks to the creative work and gameplay of international and multilingual users whose communities have flourished as a result of Web 2.0 technologies, including fanfiction archives, gaming forums, and wikis, and more general social media platforms. Altogether, studies of fandom and online interest groups within the area of language, education, and technology have revealed ways in which language learners and language users make use of these online communities for language learning, identity work, and the development of other skills and knowledge and which hold implications for the integration of technology and digital practices in language teaching.

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Introduction

Within the scope of technology for language education, fandom and online interest communities encompass a range of affinity groups in which individuals can develop skills and knowledge to foster their potential language learning or language mastery for use in online and offline contexts. Online fandom describes affinity groups comprised of fans, people who share a deep positive emotional and psychological connection to something or someone and who often engage in online fannish practices such as writing stories about the object of their interest (i.e., fanfiction), discussing their fan interests with others, or engaging in activism inspired by or in response to the person or thing they are fannish about (Duffett 2013). Online spaces have also been welcoming to the formation of other groups of users who may not share the same deep connection to a text or public figure that fans do but who instead come together to engage in shared practices or offer support around shared experiences. These online interest groups can include, for example, a Usenet group for Chinese students, scholars, and employees working and studying abroad in the United States (Bloch 2004), discussion forums for players of popular video games (Chik 2014), and coffee drinkers and appreciators who partake in larger conversations through use of the #coffeehashtag on Twitter (Zappavigna 2014a).

Taken together, educational research on fandom and online interest groups reveals ways in which participants make use of these online communities for language development, identity work (i.e., increased self-efficacy, confidence, social inclusion), and the development of other skills and knowledge, with implications for the integration of technology and digital practices in language teaching.

Early Developments

Initial work in online interest groups is exemplified by the early studies of Lam (2000, 2004, 2006) and Bloch (2004), who investigated individual and collaborative literacy practices and identity development among users of pre-Web 2.0 technologies.

In the first of these, Lam (2000) used a case-study approach to explore the language and literacy development and identify formation of a second language (L2) English learner, Almon, during 1996 and 1997. Almon, a youth who had emigrated to the United States from Hong Kong 5 years earlier, expressed fear about being marginalized as a result of his English skills. After an introductory course on email and Internet use, he began using these new skills to teach himself web design to create a fan page for a Japanese pop singer and thereby establish his presence as a member of an online fan community. Entry into this online interest group granted Almon access to a global network of fellow fans with which he was able to use and develop knowledge of the English of adolescent pop culture through instant messaging and regular email correspondence. Such involvement contributed to Almon's language and identity development by allowing him to overcome the exclusion and marginalization he often felt in formal classroom contexts, where his English skills had led to a feeling of alienation relative to his English-speaking US-born peers. In contrast, Almon's access to an online fan network of English language users allowed him to garner opportunities for English language use and to subsequently negotiate a new identity as a global English speaker.

Such identity negotiation via digital technologies and fan networks was explored further in another case study by Lam (2006) which followed the online fandom practices of Lee, whose family had moved to the United States from Hong Kong when he was nine. Like Almon, Lee's entry into online fandom took the form of the creation of a fan website, this time related to Japanese anime. While Almon's personal correspondence with fellow fans emphasized mutual interpersonal support, Lee's correspondence grew out of his sharing of links and offering of support for those interested in collaborative projects or web development. In his online global fandom community, Lee developed the reputation of being a helpful webmaster and fandom expert. As in Almon's case, Lee's online fandom identity validated his English language competence among a community of global English users. Additionally, his technical expertise was acknowledged in a manner not recognized in offline spaces. In both cases, these online fan communities provided L2 speakers of English and youth immigrants to the US alternative spaces for both language and identity development.

Lam's early work (Lam 2004, 2006) also explored language learning and identity development among L2 English users in online interest groups beyond those associated with fandom. This included virtual chatrooms frequented by L2 English speaking youth in the United States who engaged in valuable identity negotiation and English fluency development by interacting in hybrid or multilingual online spaces. Lam's focal participants, Tsu Ying and Yu Qing, were cousins who had emigrated from Hong Kong to the United States several years prior and who experienced social distance from their English speaking peers offline. Online, they regularly took part in synchronous chats with other ethnic Chinese from around the world who shared varying degrees of proficiency and comfort in communicating in English or hybrid forms of written Cantonese and English. The linguistic hybridity of these chatrooms served as a gateway toward greater ease and comfort in English language use since both girls were able to more easily carry out English conversation there without worrying about being embarrassed by their accent or accuracy. As a

result, they found themselves gaining confidence and using more English in offline interactions as well (Lam 2004). Much as Almon and Lee had done through their involvement in global online fandom, Tsu Ying and Yi Qing were able to develop their English competence and carry out identity work that resulted in greater access to, and a growing confidence in, their use of English.

Other early work on online interest groups also includes Bloch's (2004) investigation of the collaborative writing practice and development of hybrid rhetoric among a Usenet community for Chinese students, employees, and researchers in the United States. Bloch's analysis follows the mobilization of the members of this Usenet group in 1994 in response to a news broadcast featuring a prominent Chinese American newscaster on a major US television network regarding alleged Chinese spying in the United States. What began as a critique of the broadcast transformed into a collective written response as members of this community agreed that they had the same rights as US citizens to speak out. The resulting collectively written letter, detailing the potential harm of such stories for Chinese living in the United States, drew upon both Chinese and US rhetorical norms and granted members of this community the chance to write for an authentic audience.

Taken together, these early studies demonstrate the role of online interest groups that used computer-mediated communication environments common to the late 1990s and early 2000s to carry out important identity work, language development, and collaborative writing in a manner that enhanced or extended their competence and social involvement as newcomers to the United States and as L2 speakers of English offline.

Major Contributions

More recent research on online interest groups and language learning and use looks to the creative work and gameplay of international and multilingual users whose communities have flourished as a result of Web 2.0 technologies. As defined by Kaplan and Haelin (2010), Web 2.0 consists of online platforms in which "content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion" (p. 61). Web 2.0 environments encompass spaces such as fanfiction writing communities, forums dedicated to multiuser gaming communities, and even corners of social networking sites that have attracted online interest groups who often engage in play or the use of tags or in-group language to index their affiliation. Research on online interest groups and language learning in these areas has explored creative production of identity development, the use of online spaces to index global citizenship and multilingualism, the critique of gendered social expectations, and the mechanisms through which participants index their affiliation in a wider international network.

Within online fandom, the advent of Web 2.0 ushered in greater opportunities for the publishing and sharing of creative fanworks with a broad global audience. The most prominent of these fanworks, fanfiction, has been the subject of research on

identity construction and literacy development among L2 and multilingual writers. Fanfiction, defined as a type of creative writing in which fans remix, extend, or reinterpret an existing text or piece of popular media (Jamison 2013) and subsequently share, read, review, and critique one another's writing among a community of fans. The online publishing of fanfiction and the communal interaction around it was fostered by the establishment of fanfiction archives including the multifandom archive Fanfiction.net (FFN), founded in 1998. Adolescent fanfiction writing on FFN has been explored in several case studies which have focused not only on the literacy development of these young L2 writers but also on their use of the affordances of the fanfiction archive to manage and build identities around their writing (Black 2009; Thorne and Black 2011). A key feature of the fanfiction published to FFN is the Author's Notes, which accompany each story and which authors use to communicate additional information and requests to their readers. Such was the case with one writer, Nanako, who first used the Author's Notes to communicate her novice writer and new fan status in her earliest piece of fanfiction (Black 2006) and used these same Author's Notes to disclose other aspects of her cultural and linguistic background (i.e., that she was an L2 speaker of English, that she was of Asian heritage) as a way to negotiate the type of responses or feedback she was open to receiving from her readers with respect to her writing style and the content of her stories (Thorne and Black 2011).

The use of the affordances of the fanfiction platform and the community norms of fanfiction writers and readers to negotiate aspects of L2 writer identity was also employed by two other fan writers, Grace and Cherry-Chan (Black 2009). As these L2 writers of English became more established in their fanfiction communities, they also began emphasizing the multilingual and global aspects of their identity in the themes or language incorporated into their fanfiction stories. This included, for example, use of Romanized Mandarin Chinese (*Hanyu Pinyin*) and Romanized Japanese (*Romaji*) to incorporate song lyrics and dialog from Mandarin and Japanese as a way to index their language background, multilingualism, and knowledge of multiple cultures within the FFN international online community. Similarly, the use of multiple languages in stories written by young Finnish fans of both Japanese anime and US television programs revealed the writers' fandom affiliations, which they indexed through the use of language associated with the fandom source material (Leppänen 2009). Finnish fanfiction authors also displayed translocal identities in the case of bilingual stories written in both Finnish and English (Leppänen 2007).

Beyond providing authors with a space to develop their writing skills and index their affinity with a global community, online fanfiction communities have also provided young and developing writers a space in which to confront or challenge identify conflict and the social issues they face offline. Leppänen's (2008) investigation of young female Finnish authors of Mary Sue fanfiction, a type of self-insert fanfiction in which the author writes herself into the story as an original character (a Mary Sue) is one such example. In this study, these young authors used Mary Sue fanfiction to explore nonsexualized and often humorous romances that challenged the dominant sexual identity scenarios regarding young women's sexuality within Finnish society.

Like fandom, online gaming represents another area around which online communities have formed using Web 2.0, which have served as a source of L2 learning and socialization. While research exploring links between digital games and language learning has more often focused on language learning during gameplay or aspects of game design thought to be most beneficial for language learning, a select group of studies has looked at L2 learning and use on game external web sites and forums developed to support gameplay. Thorne et al. (2012) investigation of 64 Dutch and American *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) gamers brings together both strands of research through its complexity analysis of language produced during gameplay as well as its use of questionnaires and interviews to uncover sites and communities gamers regularly visited to support their gameplay. All respondents indicated frequent use of these external *WoW*-related websites to find information on strategy, lore, and weapons before, during, and after gameplay session, leading Thorne et al. (2012) to conclude that game external sites were crucial to the gaming experience. More importantly, however, the three most frequently visited sites consisted of one fan generated wiki and two sites that included extensive fan forums, highlighting the relevance of an online community for creating, sharing, and discussing these resources as part of gaming (see also Thorne 2012, for a discussion of *WoW*-related fanfiction).

Game external sites that hosted discussion forums were also integral for both gameplay and language learning in Ryu's (2013) investigation of nonnative English speakers who engaged in English language learning through participation in online game culture. In this study, Ryu relied upon the unofficial fan-based website Civfanatics.com for the game *Civilization* to recruit participants. At the time of the study, this fansite was home to over 50,000 members who could contribute to a wiki and interact and collaborate with one another via moderated forums. Ryu's participants revealed a strong connection between their gameplay and language learning and the reliance upon this online community to foster both. In particular, while gaming was determined to be useful for the development of English words and phrases or knowledge of history or geography, interaction with peer gamers in the community of Civfanatics.com was valuable for the development of discourse level English skills.

The significance of these online communities for gamers who frequently gamed in their L2 was further explored by Chik (2012, 2014), who investigated the L2 learning practices of a focal group of online gamers from east Asian contexts (China, Malaysia, and Hong Kong) and who regularly played games in either English or Japanese. Gamers acknowledged relying on forums and the online community for developing both the gaming skills and linguistic knowledge needed to play in an L2. This included, for example, resources provided by more experienced gamers on language learning practices, or links to related games that used simpler English for those interested in developing their English skills. Some gamers were also active in using their language skills to provide amateur translations of the games into their L1 before official versions were released (Chik 2014). This practice is similar to that of fan-subbing, amateur subtitling of television shows and movies that teams of fans produce before an official version are made available (Pérez-González 2006, 2007). Taken together, gaming communities and associated websites provide L2 speakers support and opportunities for autonomous language development and target language practice.

While the affiliation of online communities around fandom and gaming often intersect and share often very visible affiliations related to popular media, a third type of online community includes those that emerge from the affordances of the specific Web 2.0 applications. Here, affordances are defined as "…users' interpretation of what is made possible by the technology, based on their own technical competence and communicative intent" (Tagg and Seargeant 2014, p. 165) and include such things as a specific interest on Twitter (Zappavigna 2014a) and the degree of openness and language choice in personal profiles on Facebook (Lee 2014).

Another form of affiliation through communication-like exchanges that do not involve direct interaction between individuals but instead rely on shared and solidarity-invoking practices is also prevalent in social-media based online interest groups (Zappavigna 2014b). In her study of the Coffeetweets corpus, a subcorpus of the HERMES corpus, which consists of tweets containing the string "coffee," Zappavigna (2014b) explored how users of Twitter formed a community around their shared interest in coffee through the use of the #coffeehashtag. Similarly, language choice can be another solidarity-invoking practice that has been explored, this time among bilingual users of other types of social media. Lee's (2014) study of the techno-linguistic lives of bi- and multilingual undergraduates from Hong Kong documented the online and offline interaction behind language choice among these users on different social media platforms. For instance, the decision to use English in Facebook comments but not in public discussion forums was tied to participants' real-world identities or affiliations. For example, using English in the more private and personal space of Facebook comments allowed one user to foreground his identity as an English major among his friends and peers, but his concern over his insufficient English knowledge led to the avoidance of English in a more public online space where he might be judged for making a mistake. In another case, the use of Mandarin Chinese and the avoidance of English in online forums predominantly populated by users from mainland China was a way for one student to index his Chineseness without revealing his Hongkongness, an affiliation that would be given away through Chinese-English codeswitching.

These major contributions include research into online affiliations that arise from shared interests in popular media and gaming and which result in fanworks that transform the original source material (e.g., fanfiction) or the sharing of information and strategy for the purpose of deeper engagement in gameplay. In addition, such research also includes studies that examine affiliation that is indexed by the awareness of the affordances (and constraints or inhibitions) of different social media platforms and communities.

Work in Progress

Building upon the major contributions in this area are several different types of works in progress that look more closely at language learning as a result of ambient affiliation in social media (Solmaz under review) or which attempt to bridge the

literacy practices employed in online fandom spaces with literacy development in classroom contexts (Sauro and Sundmark 2016).

Employing an auto-ethnographic approach in which he was both researcher and informant, Solmaz (under review) documented his use of Twitter hashtags to make use of ambient affiliation for the purpose of developing his Spanish language skills. Using multiple methods of data collection, including a journal, recordings of formal Spanish lessons he took during this time, screenshots of Twitter conversations he had with fellow Spanish speakers, and the collection of Tweets he produced, Solmaz identified several patterns in his own practices to garner opportunities for interaction in Spanish. This included the use of specific and popular hashtags to join active conversations about Spanish football (e.g., #UCL, #AtletiBarca), hashtags to engage in talk about celebrations or losses at individual and national levels (e.g., #FelizSabado to wish a friend a happy Saturday; #11M10Aniversario in remembrance of the 10th anniversary of the bombings in Madrid), and to a lesser extent, the use of hashtags to index memes or jokes (e.g., a hashtag that mixed Turkish and Spanish to share humorous observations about Turkish culture). Solmaz's work, therefore, represents an in-depth look at how an autonomous language learner takes advantage of the affordances of Twitter, in this case hashtags, to successfully gain access to speech communities in his target language.

Taking an opposite approach and beginning first by observing the literacy practices of online fandom to inform the design of a task-based project for advanced English language learners, Sauro and Sundmark (under review) incorporated collaborative blog-based fanfiction writing into a literature class for preservice secondary school English teachers in Sweden for the purpose of both language and literary development. The design of this fanfiction project was modeled upon blog-based role-play fanfiction found in the Harry Potter fandom on LiveJournal (Sauro 2014). Students were self-organized into small groups of 3–6 and given instructions to write a missing moment from Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, a required text for the course. To foster discussion and collaboration, each group member took ownership of and was responsible for writing six paragraph-length contributions to the group's story from the perspective and voice of a specific character from *The Hobbit*. This required careful reading and discussion of the text to identify a plausible missing moment from the story that would not interfere with the rest of the narrative as well as careful attention to language choice and characterization to capture the voice of each character and Tolkien's writing style. Sauro and Sundmark's work therefore represents analysis and incorporation of online fandom literacy practices to inform classroom activities that draw upon real world creative language use.

Problems and Difficulties

As with all research that explores naturally occurring data and existing communities in online contexts, research on online interest groups poses a number of ethical challenges and difficulties. In addition, researchers and teachers who wish to explore

online fandoms and fan communities must also be mindful of engaging with a subculture that may feel particularly threatened by exposure to or invasion by more dominant mainstream perspectives (Duffett 2013).

Page et al. (2014) identify several major areas of concern when conducting research on social media. Many of these challenges stem from the difficulty of distinguishing what is public, private, and semi-private data in these online spaces and the degree to which online discourse is to be treated as decontextualized text or to be treated as inextricably connected to a person and therefore subject to the same need for consent and anonymity. The former challenge reflects not only the many various entry conditions and affordances of social media sites (e.g., a Twitter account can be set to public or private) but also the various perspectives among the social media users themselves. This can be seen, for instance, in online fandom members' responses to actors being asked to discuss fanfiction about characters they portray in television and print interviews (e.g., Minkel 2014, October 17). Although such fanfiction is available on technically public archives that can be viewed by anyone, many who publish in these archives consider them a semi-private space and therefore perceive the reading of fanfiction out of context to be a violation of local community norms that envision a wall between mainstream media and fandom (see, for example, the roundtable discussion in a fan podcast on fan perspectives and the fourth wall: By Fans For Fans, 2014, July 1). The latter challenge, that of distinguishing between the text and the individual, is of particular salience in light of research that shows the extensive and valuable identity work that youth and language learners engage in through the texts they produce online (e.g., Black 2009; Lam 2000, 2004, 2006; Leppänen 2008).

In addition, researchers must also be aware of and contend with the restrictions articulated in the terms of service of social media sites and which limit how and what kind of data researchers are permitted to collect and analyze (Page et al. 2014). A further challenge stems from the ephemeral nature of online data and what to do when online data are deleted or made private by an individual, communities, or through changes to the social media platform.

An additional challenge with a possible set of solutions is the degree to which applied linguistics research into online fandom is willing to be influenced by fandom studies and the practices and concerns fan studies researchers regularly grapple with. Duffet's (2013) introduction to the study of media fan culture identifies several areas of tension that have arisen when fans and fan communities have been the subject of research or public scrutiny. This includes, for instance, the historical tendency in the media and sometimes in psychology to pathologize fan behavior and to exploit such negative perceptions for the purpose of increasing readership/viewership and profit. Such treatment can make members of online fan communities particularly hostile to outsiders wishing to seek permission to research fans or their digital literacy practices. Duffet (2013) recognizes the positive contributions of fan scholars, those who are both fans and researchers, who have drawn upon their own familiarity with media fan culture to approach fandom in a manner that is respectful and fan-positive and who therefore can serve as models for other scholars carrying out research on fan communities.

Future Directions

Within the domains outlined above – fandom, gaming, and online interest groups – language learning and identity and literacy development have primarily focused on the practices of young people, often teenagers or university-aged students. Such a focus has shed light on practices of particular relevance for youth, for instance, how ESL students in the USA make use of online communities to negotiate alternate identities to that of English language learner and new and greater opportunities for English language use than may be available to them in offline classroom contexts (e.g., Black 2009; Lam 2004). However, autonomous online language learning and participation in online interest groups are not merely the domain of youth. Future research on older fans, gamers, and social media users who do so in a second language or for the purpose of broadening their literacy skills in their first language (e.g., middle aged fans of a television show who begin writing fanfiction as training for writing original fiction) represents a rich area for exploring lifelong autonomous learning and literacy development.

In addition, the formation of intentional online interest groups for those seeking alternative spaces represents an area where innovative practices in language social-ization and language use could expand. This can be seen, for example, in numerous online fandom groups that provide fans with communities for exploring alternative interpretations of popular media as a way to address social and identity issues among marginalized groups, including those that relate to gender and sexual orientation (Duffet 2013). Such exploration often takes place in the writing and reading of fanfiction in which familiar characters (e.g., Sherlock Holmes) are depicted as having a different gender, race, or sexual orientation vis-à-vis their portrayal in the original media, thereby allowing fans to depict themes or issues that may not be present in the source material. An additional example involves the negotiation of fandom community norms around pronoun use. In online discussions and on fans' profiles on social media sites, there is a growing awareness of the responsibility to be inclusive of the needs and experiences of those who identify as transgender or genderqueer (Thorne et al. 2015). These online fandom practices present rich areas for exploring the way in which language and literacy practices are used to critique or reinforce dominant discourses around identity within a global online interest group.

Cross-References

▶ Digital Games and Second Language Learning
▶ Identity in Mediated Contexts of Transnationalism and Mobility
▶ Language and Identity on Facebook
▶ Second Language Writing, New Media, and Co-Construction Pedagogies
▶ Twitter and Micro-Blogging and Language Education

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

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