CHAPTER FOUR

NEW LITERACIES AND AUTONOMY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

PHIL BENSON,
HONG KONG INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

ALICE CHIK,
CITY UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

The aim of this chapter is to discuss some areas of common ground between the New Literacies Studies (henceforth NLS) and research on autonomy in Foreign Language (henceforth FL) learning. These two fields of research share a focus on language as well as a critique of traditional school-based models of language instruction and an interest in out-of-school learning. NLS research on new literacy practices involving so-called “Web 2.0” technologies (O’Reilly 2005) is also pointing to new and relatively unexplored landscapes of autonomous FL learning. The context for this discussion will be the use of English as a FL in “globalized online spaces” designed for video, image, audio and text sharing, messaging, gaming and shopping. In particular, we want to point to evidence that these spaces are often doubly deployed by FL users as resources for authentic communication and autonomous language learning. In the literature, the term “autonomy” refers both to learning that is carried out on the learner’s own initiative outside the framework of formal education and, on the other, to a capacity to control one’s learning. In this chapter, the term “autonomous learning” mainly points to the first of these senses (Benson, 2001). These two aspects of autonomy interact, however, as the capacity to control one’s learning both facilitates and develops within experiences of self-initiated, self-directed learning.
The chapter begins with an introduction to the idea of globalized online spaces and a review of NLS research and its conceptual links to research on autonomy in FL learning. After reviewing some recent studies that have explored FL language learning and use on the Internet from a NLS perspective, we will discuss our own study of the English language learning histories of two Hong Kong users of *FanFiction.Net* and *World of Warcraft*. In conclusion, we will draw out some of the implications of these studies for research on FL learning and use.

1. Globalized online spaces

Although the resources that we are interested in can be considered simply as websites, we call them “online spaces,” because their content is mainly provided by users rather than the website owners. These spaces are typically structured by templates for uploading and displaying user-generated texts, which can often be counted in the millions. The video-sharing site *YouTube*, for example, provides templates for video content, but the content itself is provided by users, who upload videos, design profiles to represent their online identities, and comment on and evaluate videos uploaded by other users. Although these online spaces are generated from servers located in specific places, we describe them as “globalized” because they are, in principle, accessible from computers connected to the internet anywhere in the world and because the texts that contain are in many cases transnationally and translanguagially constructed. The operators of the most widely used online spaces also have explicitly globalized orientations. *YouTube* opened in 2004 using servers located in premises above a pizzeria and Japanese restaurant in San Mateo, California and with an English-language interface. At the most recent count, it was operating from servers in 18 countries and offered 14 different language interfaces. Later in this chapter we will discuss three other globalized online spaces: *Flickr*, an image and video sharing site, *FanFiction.Net*, a web site hosting amateur fiction based on characters and plots in popular novels, TV series, animated *cartoons* and *comics*, and *World of Warcraft*, a “massively multiplayer online role-play game” (MMORPG). *Flickr* was launched in Canada in 2004 and by 2008 it claimed to host more than 3 billion images. In June 2007, *Flickr* introduced Chinese, German, Spanish, French, Korean, Italian and Portuguese interfaces. *FanFiction.Net*, founded in 1998, reportedly has 1.3 million users and, although its interface is in English only, holds fiction texts in 30 different languages. Based on a series of English-language personal computer video games launched under the *Warcraft* title in 1994, *World of Warcraft* was released in English in November 2004. With servers in the United States, Europe, Asia, Australia and South America, it now claims more than 11.5 million monthly subscribers and offers multiple language packs.

It is often noted that that widespread access to the Internet is still largely confined to the wealthier regions of the world, and the wealthier population sectors of those regions. For this reason, we describe these online spaces as “globalized”, rather than “global”. But while access to these spaces is far from universal, their proliferation and growth has opened up unprecedented opportunities for long-distance communication across linguistic and cultural borders, which may be an important part of their appeal. While the websites discussed in this chapter were created to serve transactional functions – sharing images and videos on *Flickr*, sharing creative fan writing on *FanFiction.Net*, gaming on *World Of Warcraft* – they also serve broader social networking functions. In addition, there are online spaces, such as *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Blogspot* and *Twitter*, that prioritize social networking, while also offering transactional functions such as image and audio file sharing. These spaces are also of considerable interest in the context of autonomous FL learning, but here we are mainly concerned with spaces that prioritize transactional functions, because it is the communication that takes place around various kinds of shared texts that we find especially interesting. The NLS perspective, we argue, is of particular value in helping us understand the practices that surround these texts.

2. The New Literacies Studies

The term “New Literacies Studies” was first used in the early 1990s to describe research that “views literacy in its full range of cognitive, social, interactional, cultural, political, institutional, economic, moral, and historical contexts”, as opposed to research that adopted a “traditional” view of literacy as “a set of abilities or skills residing inside people’s heads” (Gee 2008: 2). Until relatively recently it was this view of literacy, rather than the literacies studied, that were seen as being “new”. The term has subsequently been used in the titles of a number of published works (e.g., Coiro et al. 2008; Hammett et al. 2007; Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Lankshear and Knobel 2003; Pahl and Rowell 2005, 2006). Research under the NLS banner is also closely linked to research under other headings, such as “multiliteracies” (Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Kalantzis and Cope 2001; New London Group 1996; Unsworth 2001), “hidden literacies” (Finders 1997), “critical literacies” (Comber and Simpson 2001; Vasquez 2004), “popular literacies” (Dyson 2003; Marsh and Millard 2006), “informal lit-

At the core of NLS research is a critique of school-based literacy instruction, which was described in one of its foundational documents as “a carefully restricted project—restricted to formalised, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language” (New London Group 1996: 60). Arguing that there is “no reading or writing in any meaningful sense of each term outside social practices” (Lankshear and Knobel 2007, 2), NLS researchers have criticised the idea that literacy consists of a set of skills to be acquired at school for practical use later in life and foregrounded the multiple literacy practices situated within the everyday lives of individuals and communities. Hull and Schultz (2001) have also pointed to the importance of out-of-school literacies to the NLS and its precursors in the Ethnography of Communication and Vygotsky/Activity Theory. “Perhaps more than any other theoretical tradition”, they argue, “NLS has embraced out-of-school contexts, almost to the exclusion of looking at schools, and has unabashedly valued out-of-school literacy practices as distinct from those associated with schools” (ibid., 589).

While the critique of school-based literacy instruction remains central to NLS research, there has recently been a shift in focus away from locally-based community literacy practices toward “digital literacies” and “digital culture” (Alvermann and Reinking 2003; Buckingham 2007; Buckingham and Willeit 2006; Davies and Merchant 2009; Gee 2007; Lankshear and Knobel 2008; Marsh 2005; Thomas 2004, 2006, 2007; Willeit et al. 2008). Knobel and Lankshear’s (2007) new literacies “sampler”, for example, includes chapters on young people’s use of websites, laptop computers in schools, role-playing games, video games, fan-fiction, blogging, and online memes. In their introduction to this sampler, Lankshear and Knobel (2007, 7) argue that the literacy practices at issue are “new” in the sense that they have both new “technical stuff” and new “ethos stuff”, and “mobilize very different kinds of values and priorities and sensibilities than the literacies we are familiar with”. These new literacies, they argue, are (1) more participatory and less published, (2) more collaborative and less individuated, and (3) more distributed and less author-centric than conventional literacies. Davies and Merchant (2009) point to four characteristic features of the online spaces within which these new literacy practices are taking place: (1) encouragement of active presence through online profiles, (2) avatars and identities, facilitation of user modifications and personalization, (3) reliance on user-generated content, and (4) encouragement of social participation. These characteristics, they suggest, are relevant to the kinds of informal social learning that can be observed in Web 2.0 spaces. One of the main characteristics of this learning, according to the findings of the Digital Youth Project in the United States, lies in the ways in which “the digital world lowers barriers to self-directed learning” (Ito et al. 2008, 2). “New media allow for a degree of freedom and autonomy for youth that is less apparent in a classroom setting”, they argue. Their efforts are also “largely self-directed, and the outcome emerges through exploration, in contrast to classroom learning that is oriented toward set, predefined goals”.

Facilitation of long-distance transcultural and translilingual communication is another characteristic of Web 2.0 spaces, which has received relatively little attention in NLS research to date. More accurately, perhaps, NLS research has pointed to this characteristic without fully exploring its linguistic implications. In her work on the photo-sharing site Flickr, for example, Davies (2007) describes a group with the name “What’s in your bag?”, in which participants from around the world share images of the contents of the bags that they carry around with them every day. She comments that by posting images to the group, “individuals not only enact an online identity, but also contribute to a text whose authorship is globally distributed” (ibid., 553). The kinds of interaction around photographs that take place on Flickr, Davies argues, produce “a space for learning” and “[t]he interaction is compelling, where the local is represented on a global stage, and where a new textual space is produced” (ibid., 550). Davies focuses here on the collaborative construction of identities and texts, but there is also an unexplored linguistic dimension to these representations of the local on a global stage, as many contributors to Flickr use English as a FL in a space in which English appears to be the dominant language. One of Davies’s data extracts illustrates the potential for research along this dimension. In this extract, Astrid, a Norwegian, comments on a photograph of Saffron, a North American, wearing a “throw” that her grandmother has given her, by asking what a “throw” is. In response, Saffron explains that it is a kind of “small blanket” and then goes on to talk about related words, such as “pashmina”, “wrap”, “shawl” and “poncho” (ibid., 559). What we might call attention to here is the way in
which a kind of “min-English lesson” is inserted into an authentic content-focused interaction. While there is nothing particularly unusual in this as an example of translanguaging, what is remarkable is the possibility that such examples may be a routine feature of interactions among strangers communicating across considerable geographical distances in online spaces such as Flickr.

Ito et al. (2008) also point to what appear to be innovative examples of FL use and learning in globalized online spaces. They mention, for example, an American teenager collaborating with a peer in Spain to produce an online role-play within a fan-fiction site, an 18-year-old Brazilian “anime music video” producer working creatively with Japanese-language animations, and “fansubbers” in Japan who add English subtitles to Japanese animations and post them on the Internet, often within hours of their appearance on Japanese TV. Examples of these kinds point to a view of globalized online spaces as sites for translanguaging activity among individuals whose geographical locations might otherwise restrict their FL use. Although NLS researchers have not paid a great deal of attention to FL use and learning in these spaces, their work can help FL learning researchers understand some of its particular characteristics.

### 3. FL learning and NLS

Although there has been relatively little interaction between NLS and FL learning research to date, two researchers have straddled the boundaries between the two fields. Black’s (2005, 2006, 2008) studies of fan fiction writers fall within the NLS framework, but make explicit reference to issues of English FL learning, while Lam’s (2000, 2004, 2006) ethnographic studies of young Asian migrants in the United States have been published in the field of FL education, but adopt an NLS perspective.

Black’s (2005, 2006, 2008) work is based on the world of fan fiction, a writing genre in which amateur authors create and exchange stories based on popular novels, comics, movies, and TV shows. Fan fiction is said to date back to the 17th century and, in its modern form, to the 1960s when texts were typically circulated by mail. Fanfiction.net has the largest archive of fan fiction on the Web and serves as a focal point for publishing and feedback for its largely female, teenage user base. NLS studies of fan fiction have largely focused on English language texts written by native speakers of English, but Black has also called attention to the large number of English language learners on Fanfiction.net, who participate in order to use and improve their English. In a case study of a teenage Chinese migrant to the United States, who writes fan fiction based on the Japanese anime *Card Captor Sakura*, Black has shown how Nanako gained confidence and improved her English language writing competence over time by writing and receiving feedback in a supportive environment. Black also points out that linguistic and cultural hybridity is particularly salient in anime-based writing, because “native English speakers are not automatically granted privileged status within the community, and ELLs [English language learners] are often granted insider status within the realm of anime” (Black 2005, 123). She also notes that authors like to include Japanese and Chinese words in their stories and that Japanese and Chinese speakers are often called upon as resources for translation.

Lam (2000, 2004, 2006) has reported a number of case studies of out-of-school literacy practices involving English and hybrid language practices among Chinese migrants to the United States. One of her studies focuses on two teenage girls’ participation in a Hong Kong-based chat room frequented by Cantonese speakers overseas and in Hong Kong (Lam, 2004). At school, these girls mainly mixed with other recent migrants, with whom they spoke Cantonese, and they reported that when they attempted to speak English with American-born Chinese students, they were laughed at. The girls reported that the chat room, which they logged into for three hours per day and more on weekends, provided a “safe environment” for learning and practicing English and that online chatting had increased their confidence in using English. Lam also describes how the girls engaged in hybrid language practices involving romanized Cantonese, Cantonese-English code-switching and bilingual word-play. A second case study involved a teenage Hong Kong migrant, Lee, who had been in the United States for a number of years. Although Lee did not speak a great deal of English at school and was described by one teacher as unmotivated, he spent most evenings working on his anime website and corresponding with people via online chat and e-mail. Although Lee was still in high school, his website had attracted international attention and become a collaborative enterprise in which he orchestrated contributions from individuals in various parts of the world. As Lam (2006, 84) describes him, “Lee carried out his Web site project and socialized in English in a global population of anime aficionados”, where “he gained a different status as an English speaker on the Internet as many others also spoke English as an additional language, and he was a well-respected Webmaster of anime”.

In our own research on the English language learning histories of university students in Hong Kong, we have also come across individuals like Lee, who have active lives as English users within globalized online spaces. One of these students, CK, describes how “my English learning history dates back to 1992 when my brother brought a game home. The
game was *Warcraft*, a personal computer game set in a medieval fantasy world. Fascinated by this world, CK started to go to the public library every Friday after school to look for books on medieval war and weaponry. As CK puts it, "though it was a huge barrier for a kid that most of the relevant information was printed in English, my interest and curiosity took every obstacle down and led me into a totally new world". His extensive reading, he writes, laid the foundation for the development of his English competence and a deep interest in English reading. With the advent of the Internet, like many young Hong Kongers, CK chatted online with friends in English, partly because of the inconvenience of Chinese input systems in the early days. He also switched to online gaming, which gave him the opportunity to interact with other English-speakers with similar interests. CK explains:

It was the moment when the concrete foundation took effect. I could learn fast from native English users and sometimes I even discussed it with them. I still remember clearly that the first topic I discussed with a British was the appropriateness of double negative sentences like "he didn’t remember anything." All in all, the bloom of the Internet marked the actual improvement of my proficiency of English. My knowledge about English grammars and sentence structures was dramatically enhanced and my school grades of English improved remarkably during this time span.

Our second Hong Kong case study participant, Sophie, is a fan fiction writer and we leave her to tell her story in her own words.

Reading is still one of my favourite things to do now. I love reading and get inspiration from different authors. I still remember I was once very addicted to a series of books [called] Shopaholic. I bought every single book in this series and I read each of them for at least three times. I was so obsessed that I even registered as a writer in Fanfiction.net.... As a new writer there, I read a lot of writing from others, exclusively from those who’re also top fans of the Shopaholic. However, since most of the writers in the network are British or Americans, I felt my ability in writing is just much inferior to them. I was unhappy and I realized that I must improve my ability to write in English so that I could write my mind out! So, I read more and more and I learned how to write in a more natural way by asking and trying. I asked for opinions from other foreigners in the same fan fiction network and tried to improve my writing according to their advice. It is really good to have friends from other European countries because you can learn a lot from them in daily conversations. It is not because I was being forced to type in English when talking to them online, but they taught me a lot of slangs and some unusual phrases that I never came across before. Isn’t it good that you can learn native English even when

you don’t have a chance to study abroad? My fruitful experience as a fan fiction writer gave me a chance to meet more friends from other countries and most importantly, a golden opportunity to learn how to write good and native English.

Sophie’s and CK’s stories have much in common with those of the participants in Black’s and Lam’s studies and to this extent they provide supporting evidence for an emerging picture of FL learners taking advantage of the affordances of globalized online spaces to both use and learn English. Interestingly, the task that they were set—writing their English language learning histories—encouraged them to position themselves as FL learners, but in the course of their writing they both repositioned themselves as FL users. Although CK presents himself as a learner in the extracts that we have quoted, he also describes himself as a person who is "confident of giving a lecture about [medieval warfare] anytime upon request" and as a gamer in an environment in which "English was no doubt the only choice for communication". Sophie, on the other hand, describes herself as a person who is learning to write fan fiction in English, as opposed to a person who is simply learning English. She also positions native English-speaking contributors to Fanfiction.net as people from whom she can learn this particular skill, as opposed to people from whom she can learn English. If we are to interpret this language learning history data from an NLS perspective, its most striking characteristic is the situated and purposeful character of the English language learning that takes place. CK and Sophie clearly are learning English as a FL, but their focus is on doing something with English rather than directly learning the language itself.

4. Discussion

In many parts of the world, the social architecture of FL education is largely based on the assumption that the students are learning the target language, not for immediate or concurrent use, but for use at some unspecified point in the future. As we noted earlier, NLS research has developed largely as a response to a similar assumption in traditional literacy instruction models, showing how such models reduce literacy to the acquisition of decontextualized reading and writing skills, which are separated both from concurrent out-of-school literacy practices and, often, from any meaningful future purpose. The same might be said of FL education, which is based in many parts of the world on two key assumptions: first, that instruction is a necessary precondition for target language use and, second, that the content of FL instruction should be abstracted from au-
authentic contexts of language use through procedures such as sequentially organized language curricula, teaching of grammatical rules, discrete skill development, and tests and examinations. In contrast to people who are learning to read or write their first language, however, FL learners are very often isolated from other users of the target language and, consequently lack opportunities for concurrent situated target language use. Communicative and task-based approaches to FL education aim to overcome this constraint by creating contexts for target language use in the classroom, but these approaches also tend to struggle in situations where opportunities for everyday target language use outside the classroom are lacking. In the Hong Kong primary school system, for example, it has been observed that teachers often adopt hybrid approaches to EFL teaching, in which the mandatory task-based approach is fused with more traditional textbook/grammar-based approaches (Carless 2004).

It is in this context that the growth of translilingual communication in globalized online spaces appears to be especially significant. As ease of access to these spaces breaks down geographical, social and cultural barriers to concurrent FL learning and use, the assumptions on which much FL education is based may also be undermined. If, for example, CK and Sophie are intensely involved in English-using online gaming and fan fiction communities, in what sense do they need the EFL instruction that their schools provide, if the nature of this instruction is based on the assumption that they are not concurrently engaged in these kinds of communication in English? We put this as a rhetorical question, without suggesting that the answer should be “none whatsoever”. Rather, we want to suggest that there is a need for research that views the rise of globalized online spaces not simply in terms of affordances for FL learning, but more broadly as a phenomenon that may ultimately lead to very different ways of going about FL teaching and learning than those we are accustomed to today. At present, research in this area is in its infancy and, in conclusion to this chapter, we limit ourselves to pointing to two main directions in which future research might lead us. The first of these directions concerns the text types and genres that are emerging in online globalized spaces, while the second concerns possible models of FL education.

One of the key issues on which NLS research is liable to be helpful to our understanding of text-types and genres is in its focus on everyday literacy practices. FL education has traditionally set a high priority on spoken interaction, especially since the advent of communicative language learning, although, in practice, written exercises and testing procedures have tended to undermine the strength of this priority. The main exception to this rule is found in situations where the students are learning a FL for academic purposes and reading and writing are given priority. The text-types and genres that are characteristic of the situated literacy practices that NLS research focuses on do not usually receive a great deal of attention in FL instruction, however, possibly because they are typically community-based and not high on the prescribed list of communicative priorities for FL learners. From this perspective, one of the most striking features of translilingual communication in globalized online spaces is the fact that it is primarily text-based, rather than speech-based, and that FL learning and FL use are often seamlessly woven together within text-based interactions.

Earlier, we referred to an extract from Davies’s (2007) data in which a Norwegian asks a North American the meaning of the English word “throw” in a comment on a photograph posted on Flickr. In a relatively simple way, this interaction illustrates three apparently characteristic features of translilingual interaction in online spaces. First, it involves adaptation of a familiar kind of interaction to an essentially unfamiliar textual context: a FL learning question here, appears in a space “intended for” comments on a photograph. Second, the interaction takes place around a “third” object, in this case a photograph, through which it becomes situated. Lastly, it is essentially a casual, friendly and mutually supportive interaction: one that does not apparently involve a great deal of commitment on either side, but nevertheless generates positive feelings for both participants. Whether these features are characteristic or not is a matter for research. Here, we limit ourselves to the observation that translilingual interactions in globalized online spaces appear to be generating new text-types and genres, which are susceptible to analysis as situated FL literacy practices. Activities such as fansubbing and fan fiction writing are, no doubt, producing FL texts with their own distinctive ways of incorporating FL learning interactions. Sophie, for example, described how, through participating in fan fiction, she learned how to write more naturally by “asking and trying”. A significant point here is that both the “asking” and the “trying” involved situated literacy practices and the production of texts. Sophie “tried” not only by writing fan fiction texts, but also by posting them on FanFiction.Net, where they would attract comment. She also “asked” by constructing requests for advice as written text in public and private interactions around her fan fiction.

Our second direction for future research concerns the implications of the rise of globalized online spaces for FL education. On the face of it, conventional models of FL education do not seem to be well-suited to people such as CK and Sophie, who are deeply involved with online communities and networks in which they use their target language on a
daily basis. This is not simply because they have access to authentic target language use, but also because participation in online networks seems to be supportive of particular kinds of FL learning. In a broad sense, we might say that globalized online spaces are especially supportive of autonomous learning in a double sense: they provide excellent opportunities for out-of-class target language use; they also provide excellent opportunities for the development of autonomy as a capacity to control one’s own learning. What is remarkable, then, about CK’s and Sophie’s online activities is not that they have used globalized online spaces to learn a FL, but that they have learned, by themselves, how to use these spaces to learn a FL.

Out-of-class FL learning can be described along a continuum from “self-instruction” to “naturalistic” learning (Benson 2001). In self-instruction, the learner engages in activities that are explicitly designed for FL learning and for the explicit purpose of FL learning. In naturalistic learning, activities are carried out in the FL, but they are not designed for FL learning, nor does the learner engage in them for the purpose of FL learning. Much of the FL learning that takes place in globalized online spaces seems to occupy a space between these two extremes, which can be described as “self-directed naturalistic learning”. In this mode of learning, the learner engages in activities for the broad purpose of FL learning, but the activities are not explicitly designed for this purpose. While engaged in activities, the learner focuses more on their content than their linguistic dimensions, but they also pay attention to language learning opportunities when they arise. This mode of learning seems to be characteristic of autonomous learners who are able to create, and take advantage of, situations involving face-to-face communication with target language users. These kinds of situations are also notoriously difficult to create in situations where target language users are in short supply. The significance of the rise of online globalized spaces, therefore, lies in the opportunities they are opening up for FL learners who are physically isolated from target language users, but willing to create self-directed naturalistic learning situations using the Internet. Sophie, for example, showed that she was particularly skilled at the art of creating self-directed naturalistic learning situations, immersing herself in the content of the activity of writing fan fiction, and at the same time taking up opportunities for language learning when they arose. CK was similarly skilled in creating FL situations around his interest in medieval warfare. Interestingly, Sophie and CK were both engaged in FL learning activities around their interests before they discovered FanFiction.net and World of Warcraft. Their discovery of these spaces, however, allowed them to share these interests with other users of English and to extend their learning of English in ways that would probably have been otherwise impossible.

The problem that FL learners like Sophie and CK pose for FL education, therefore, is one of understanding the complexities of FL learning processes that are primarily self-directed and “content-driven” and the ways in which systems currently focused on instruction can be adapted to their interests and needs. It is possible that people who are intensively involved with FL communities or in the pursuit of some interest through a FL may neither need nor benefit from FL instruction. This remains a researchable question, but if it proves to be the case, FL educational systems may need to switch to more responsive roles, supporting learners’ autonomous forays into globalized online spaces and providing spaces in which they can exchange information and experiences. CK’s and Sophia’s case studies, for example, emerged from a university level EFL course, in which the participants produced and shared multimedia language learning histories online.

5. Conclusion

One objection to the kinds of studies that we have discussed in this chapter, and to NLS research more generally, is that the case study subjects and the literacy practices that they are engaged in are not typical of the wider populations to which they belong. We might add to this that phenomena that appear to be widespread when viewed from the perspective of the Internet, tend to appear as exceptional when viewed from the perspective of the general population. There are, for example, more FL users actively contributing to World of Warcraft and FanFiction.net than we would care to count, but CK and Sophia are exceptional within their peer group at their university in Hong Kong as active users of these sites. To place our argument in perspective, therefore, we need to acknowledge that the proportion of any particular group of FL learners that are actively participating in globalized online spaces for FL learning purposes is probably relatively small at the present time. This is also likely to vary according to the FL in question and much of what we have said in this paper may apply far more to learners of English than does to learners of other European languages. Among EFL learners, access to the Internet is also a major issue at a time when the majority worldwide still lack access to computer technology and the vast majority lack the relatively unhindered access that Hong Kong students such as CK and Sophia enjoy. These are, however, questions on which we have relatively little hard information, on which more research is needed. As a general rule, case studies tend to reveal that
the participants are far more engaged in out-of-class FL learning than the researchers or their teachers supposed.

A second objection may be that the nature of FL interaction in online globalization is such that it does not make a significant contribution to FL acquisition. Learners may be using the FL knowledge and skills they have acquired through instruction, but not necessarily learning. Examination of online texts does provide some evidence of processes such as asking for information about the FL and error correction, while individual case studies show evidence of self-reported learning and learning to learn. Nevertheless, the processes, extent, and depth of FL learning in individual cases remains a matter for research that brings these two kinds of evidence together.

In spite of these objections, the studies and data that we have discussed in this chapter may represent a hidden underbelly of FL learning that has yet to be brought to light or a potential that will become much more apparent in future years as Internet access expands and globalized online spaces continue to grow. In either case, the research that we carry out today in this area will make important contributions to the design of FL education in the future.

References


Benson, Phil. 2001. Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning. London: Longman.


Street, Brian. 1995. Social literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography and education. London: Longman.


Chapter Five

Supporting Autonomy Development in Online Learning Environments: What Knowledge and Skills Do Teachers Need?

Sophie Bailly, CNRS – Nancy Université

Abstract

An ongoing action-research project1 at the CRAEL2 has shown that students at a vocational high school near Nancy have engaged with more or less success in an out-of-school and out-of-curriculum Internet-based foreign language learning scheme (Bailly et al. 2008). The less successful students sometimes lack the necessary skills such as knowing how to choose keywords for a search on the Internet, or how to assess the quality of the learning resources they find. They are puzzled by contradictory information or select unsuitable resources. Personal motivation and accessible online resources are not sufficient conditions to make self-directed learning (Holec 1998) possible or easy for those students, whose learning process is oriented by the social promotion of teaching/heteronomy over learning/autonomy (as defined by Holec 1990; Holec 1991; Little 1991). Autonomous use of the Internet is related to the capacity to look critically at the information and tools it offers (Villanueva 2006). The aim of this

---

1 A team action-research project on Advising Practices in Self-Directed Learning Schemes. This group is composed of the author and her colleagues: Claude Normand, Myriam Pereiro, Églantine Guéry, Rachel Viné, Jinning Wang.

2 Centre de Recherches et d’Applications Pédagogiques en Langues, ATILF/CNRS/UMR 7118/Université Nancy 2.