Chapter 8

(Dis)Engagement in Internet Linguistic Practices among Sojourners in China

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a longitudinal study that investigates two American students’ engagement in a local Social-Networking Site (SNS), Weibo, at a study abroad program in China. SNSs are often thought to hold great potential for L2 teaching. However, engagement in SNS activities not only requires cultural orientation towards social media but also knowledge about how to communicate on SNSs. Drawing from language socialization and community of practice frameworks, this chapter examines how two American students participated in networking activities on Weibo and to what extent they engaged in the use of Chinese Internet Language (CIL). The findings show that the incorporation of the local SNS in instruction seemed to help the students become aware of CIL, but their participation in Weibo remained peripheral. In addition, compared to the student who did home stay, the student living in the dorm seemed to have more opportunities to be socialized into CIL.

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites (SNSs) have become increasingly common in our everyday life. As of May 2013, 72% of online adults in the U.S. are SNS users (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Statistics from China are equally high, with over 90% of its Internet users having accounts on one of the social media sites, such as Sina Weibo and Renren (Chiu, Lin, & Silverman, 2012).

The popularity of social media has drawn attention from scholars in applied linguistics. SNSs are often believed to hold great potential for L2 education (e.g., Mitchell, 2012). Research has shown that some ESL learners in the U.S. develop the ability to participate in English literacy practices by using SNSs (e.g., Chen, 2013; Lam, 2004; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011). Meanwhile, SNSs are also often thought to hinder American students’ L2 learning while they are overseas, because they...
can easily opt out of the local linguistic practices by logging onto U.S.-based sites such as Facebook (Kinginger, 2008).

Such concerns may indeed be the case for study abroad students in many countries where U.S.-based sites are easily accessible and very popular. Yet it remains unknown how these students actually use social media when they are overseas learning other languages. Although American students have been reported to engage in various types of local discourse practices while studying abroad (e.g., Cook, 2008; Shively, 2011), few researchers have explored their participation in SNSs and their experience of learning and using L2 on the Internet during their sojourns. In addition, China has an abundance of popular local SNSs due to its socio-political context, presenting a unique social media landscape (Chiu et al., 2012). The popularity of local SNSs has further engendered a new type of linguistic practices, known as the Chinese Internet Language (CIL). For American students in China, participating in activities on local SNSs and engaging in the corresponding ways of language use can potentially allow such processes of L2 socialization to take place.

This chapter aims to describe how two American students engaged in the use of CIL as well as the activities on local SNS over their semester in China. They were studying at a program where instructors continuously incorporated the use of social media and CIL in the curriculum. Drawing on theories of language socialization (e.g., Duff & Talmy, 2010; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), this study views learning of CIL as a byproduct of their socialization processes with members of China’s SNS community – both online and offline (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009). What follows in this chapter outlines the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this project and presents its findings. This chapter concludes with a discussion of implications and future research directions.

**BACKGROUND**

**The Social-Media Landscape in China**

With more than 500 million Internet users, China has already surpassed the United States (245 million users) and is currently the country with the largest population online (Chiu et al., 2012). While popular U.S.-based sites such as Facebook are not accessible, local social media sites are becoming increasingly popular among China’s urban residents. The focus of this study is Sina Weibo (simply referred to as Weibo below). Weibo is among the most popular SNSs in China. It was reported to have 309 million users by the end of 2012, accounting for 54.7% of all Internet users (including but not limited to users of social media) in China (CNNIC, 2013). Not surprisingly, it was also the SNS selected at the study abroad program under question.

Weibo is a Twitter-like micro-blogging site that allows its users to engage in a variety of sharing and networking activities, including uploading original posts containing texts and/or images, following other users, reading and/or resending their posts, and commenting on other people’s posts. Based on what activities one engages in, Chiu et al. (2012) categorized four types of Weibo users, namely, social enthusiasts, resenders, readers, opinionated users, and those who are inactive. Social enthusiasts spend a substantial amount of time online and actively engage in a variety of activities (e.g., uploading, reading, resending, and commenting, etc.). In comparison, resenders, readers, and opinionated users are only participating primarily in a limited number of these activities (Chiu et al., 2012). This categorization can help us conceptualize membership in the Weibo community as being unequal among its users.

China’s social media users also demonstrate an interesting demographic pattern. SNS use is particularly common among city dwellers, with