

ANNA KAGANIEC-KAMIEŃSKA

INFORMAL LANGUAGE LEARNING
IN ONLINE INTEREST COMMUNITIES:
A REVIEW OF SELECTED RESEARCH METHODS

1. INTRODUCTION: GLOBAL AND DIGITALIZED CONTEXT

In today's globalized world, advanced communication technologies provide access to new opportunities and leisure activities (c.f. Appadurai, 1996). An integral part of the networked digital world is the English language, which is the language of the majority of global website content (*State of Connectivity 2015*, p. 27). The role of English as a global language is undeniable and has been examined and discussed by numerous authors (see, e.g., Crystal, 2003).

New communication technologies have been particularly, but not exclusively, appealing to young people, who are the most digitally connected age group and have been described as, for example, *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001) or the *net generation* (Tapscott, 1998). According to UNICEF, 71 percent of young people aged 15 to 24 worldwide are online, as compared to 48 percent of the general population (UNICEF, 2017, p. 1). Minors under 18 make up an estimated one-third of Internet users, and their proportion is expected to increase. What is important, as children grow, the influence of digitalization on their life experiences “grows with them”, providing “seemingly limitless opportunities to learn and to socialize, to be counted and to be heard” (p. 8). Young people spend their time online *hanging out, messing around, or geeking out* (Ito et al., 2008). As noted by Ito et al. (2008, p. 1), electronic devices, such as mobile phones, websites, social networking platforms, online games and video-sharing sites, have all become “fixtures of youth culture”.

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However, young people are not the only group that participates in the digitally networked world and appreciates the benefits offered by online communication technologies. Internet users use digital media for both friendship-driven activities (i.e., to find and keep friends) and interest-driven activities related to their hobbies and ways of spending free time (Ito et al., 2008; see also Jenkins, 2006, 2012). The availability of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, as well as dedicated websites, make it particularly easy to join local and international fan groups, participate in online gaming or engage in numerous virtual activities.

Online interest groups respond to different social and emotional needs of their members. The “digital wilds”, understood as “digital spaces, communities, and networks that are independent of formal instructional contexts” (Sauro & Zourou, 2019, p. 2), offer their explorers many potential benefits. One of them is informal (language) learning (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Thus, online interest groups can function as communities where fans can improve their language skills, and language learning can occur naturally or with the help of others. This informal learning experience is worth studying, given the learner’s autonomy and, at times, the collaborative nature of this process.

The objective of this article is to reflect upon English language learning in online interest-driven groups, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of selected research methods such as grounded theory methods, virtual ethnography, and mixed methods. These methods have been chosen for discussion because they may be particularly helpful for researching informal language learning in online interest communities, as they provide an opportunity to observe the unique characteristics and dynamics of specific communities, enabling an in-depth examination and a better understanding of the researched context.

2. LANGUAGE LEARNING IN ONLINE FANDOMS

Online fandom communities consist of dedicated followers of a particular pop-cultural phenomenon or product (cf. Sauro 2014). Many fandom groups form around cultural phenomena coming from English-speaking countries, whereas others do not, with Japanese anime and manga, Korean pop music (K-pop), and Korean series (K-drama) being some examples. In the latter case, the English language, being global, often serves as a third language helping fans across the world understand and appreciate the lyrics, dialogues, or comics (Valero

Porras & Cassany, 2016; Zhang & Cassany, 2019; Bastien & Fierro, 2023). Here, the English language means “access”.

However, the current, more interactive Web 2.0, which allows for the content to be continuously modified by many users “in a participatory and collaborative fashion” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), enables users not only to receive and consume online content but also to participate, create, and share. Many “consumers” have, thus, become “prosumers”, which means that they not only consume but also produce online content (see, e.g., Reed, 2014, p. 227), such as, for example, YouTube uploads or product reviews.

Web 2.0 and the concept of “prosuming” highlight Internet users’ creativity rather than passivity. So does “participatory culture”, which has significantly accelerated in the digital era (Jenkins, 2006, 2007, 2012). As Jenkins notes, a participatory culture is a culture with “strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices”. Among the potential benefits of participatory cultures are, therefore, “the diversification of cultural expression”, and “opportunities for peer-to-peer learning” (2007, p. xi–xii; see also Reed, 2014), the latter being the topic of this article. Some of the different forms of this culture are, precisely, “affiliations”, that is, “[m]emberships, formal and informal, in online communities”, and “expressions”, that is “[p]roducing new creative forms, such as digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videos, fan fiction, zines, or mash-ups” (2007, pp. xi–xii).

Online fandom communities are a perfect environment for both consuming and producing related content. In fact, many fans engage in multiple forms of creative production such as fanfiction (fiction based on existing work or game, written by fans), fansubbing (translations of audiovisual content translated by fans for other fans), or scanlation (scanning and translating of manga comics), etc.

Interest groups have attracted much attention from scholars representing different disciplines. Numerous studies have been conducted on various fandoms and communities around the world, for example, K-pop fans (Han, 2017; Kim, 2012; Trzcińska, 2018), manga, anime/otaku, and cosplay (Cobos, 2010; Materne, 2019; Vardell et al., 2021) or gamers (Rodríguez Ramos, 2016). Some studies examine language practices and discursive practices within these groups (see, e.g., Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009). Research on interest-driven creative activities and products has also been growing, and such forms as fanfiction, fansubbing, scanlation, or fanart, have been discussed in several works (e.g., Torti Frugone, 2017; Vazquez-Calvo, Shafirova et al., 2019; Vazquez-Calvo Zhang et al., 2019; Salkowitz, 2021).

The above-mentioned creative activities require specific knowledge and skills. These skills often develop and are refined over time as the authors create and share their work, cooperate with others, and receive feedback. For example, fansubbers may improve their language skills thanks to the informal mentorship of fellow fans who are more proficient in a given language (Shafirova & Cassany, 2019). Another possible example of beneficial collaboration may be that of a non-native English-speaking fan fiction author working with a native-English “beta-reader” (i.e., a test reader who provides feedback, suggests improvements, and marks errors). Such collaboration can be valuable for the author, helping them improve their language skills and their “art of writing” (c.f. Black, 2006, 2009; Evans et al., 2017). For prosumers, knowing English often means “expressing themselves” and “getting their ideas known to others”.

This language teaching-learning experience and language skills improvement have been a recurrent topics addressed by various authors (e.g. Black, 2006; Sauro, 2019; Thorne et al., 2009; Vazquez-Calvo, Zhang et al., 2019; Zhang & Cassany, 2019; Shafirova & Cassany, 2019; Ríos Izquierdo, 2021; Vazquez-Calvo, Shafirova et al., 2019).

3. SELECTED RESEARCH METHODS: A DISCUSSION

3.1 Overview of research methods used in studying language learning

Before the birth and development of digital communication technologies, research methods for studying language learning included various qualitative and quantitative methods, such as, for example, participant observation, interviews, surveys, case studies focused on specific groups, ethnographic studies, as well as introspective methods like diary writing (Nunan, 1992; Nimehchisalem, 2018). With the emergence of online communities, many of these methods have transitioned into the virtual world, as evident in online interviews and surveys, and virtual ethnography (see also Jemielniak, 2020; Smoleń-Wawrzusiszyn, 2016). The final selection of specific methods, tools and research designs always depends on particular research problems.

Grounded theory and virtual ethnography have been chosen for discussion in this article for several reasons. First, these methods allow researchers to explore language learning in interest groups without preconceived expectations or hypotheses, which helps capture the complexities of the language learning within specific groups. Second, these methods allow flexible data collection, enabling researchers to respond and adapt to group dynamics and practices, while being guided by

emergent themes. Third, since these methods do not rely on pre-existing hypotheses, insights are derived directly from the data. Finally, both methods focus on the perspectives of participants; additionally, virtual ethnography also allows researchers to observe members of diverse online interest communities in their natural virtual environment. On the other hand, mixed methods, which combine complementary qualitative and quantitative approaches, offer in-depth insights into informal language learning within interest groups, as they can help identify patterns and correlations.

3.2 Virtual ethnography

Virtual ethnography is an important method used in research on online communities (Hine, 2000, 2008; Angelone, 2019). Well-known ethnographic studies include Baym (2000) on an Internet soap opera fan group and Kozinets (1997, 2010) on Star Trek Fans. The usefulness and benefits of virtual ethnographic observation have also been shown in more recent studies on online communities and language in these groups (Black, 2009; Vardell et al., 2021; see also Roeske, 2013).

Virtual ethnography helps study interactions, mechanisms, and practices occurring in (and thanks to) the virtual space. A study on language practices and language learning enables direct immersion in the online environments of selected groups, such as their web interfaces, posts, threaded discussions, visuals, etc. (cf. Angelone, 2019). This allows researchers to observe, document, and explore issues such as the dynamics of the group, how group members interact with others (in a particular language, bilingually, or using hybrid linguistic forms), or whether their online communication depends on a particular purpose, online context, topic, motive, or people. The virtual ethnographic method allows researchers to examine the language teaching-learning processes within the group, whether they occur in a mentored or not-mentored way (see, e.g., Shafirova & Cassany, 2019).

Apart from obtaining data directly from the group, a virtual ethnographic study may also help formulate survey and interview questions for further research. Moreover, since fans are often not confined to one group (e.g., Facebook) but interact in diverse ways for various purposes and activities, virtual ethnographic research may identify these additional online and face-to-face ways and forms of interaction (e.g., meetings for special events, and fanfiction sites). These multiple environments where fans function simultaneously may be investigated in separate in-depth studies.

However, implementing virtual ethnography in research on social media groups may raise several issues. One of them is access. Due to the private status of some groups, implementing virtual ethnography may not always be possible.

A critical issue is the ethical questions about the privacy of the group members, given that not only private but also many public groups (e.g., on Facebook) ask that their members' privacy be respected – mutual trust being one of the key rules. That is why researchers should always work on solving potential problems and follow the guidance of ethical commissions (see also Angelone, 2019; Deller, 2018). To protect the privacy of the group members, the collected data should be anonymized, and the posts cited in the research findings should be modified so that the originals cannot be easily recovered.

Another problem concerning the implementation of virtual ethnography is potential deceitful answers (Hine, 2008). The passive engagement of the researcher and an undisrupted flow of interaction within the studied group minimalizes the risk of deception. However, the active engagement of the researcher within the group (e.g., initiating a discussion on the research topic) may be more problematic, even though language learning is not a sensitive or controversial topic.

3.3 Mixed methods

In research on online fandoms and language-related topics such as literacies, writing skills, and language learning, ethnographic (participant) observation frequently combines with interviews (Curwood et al., 2013; Evans et al., 2017; Vardell et al., 2012; Valero Porrás & Cassany, 2016; Black, 2006; Zhang & Cassany, 2019; Shafirova & Cassany, 2019).

The benefit of conducting interviews is that they help collect and document the respondents' narratives, which always generate valuable insights into the research problem (Bennett, 2018; Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). Collected narratives may also help identify ways in which the research may be extended into a broader (future or follow-up) study. For example, when examining language practices and learning in online fandoms, a potential new area for exploration could be learners' *feelings* towards and *beliefs* about the studied language (e.g., emotional attachments or stereotypes), as well as their *behaviours* towards this language and its users or learners. Feelings, beliefs, and behaviours/behavioural intentions constitute, in fact, three components of language attitudes – as defined by Ryan et al. (in Kircher & Zipp, 2022, p. 4). Thus, if extended, such research could not only document the learning process but also shed light on learners' language attitudes.

Combining virtual ethnographic (participant) observation with interviews (qualitative) and an online survey (quantitative) may enable an even more profound analysis and a more complete study, as each of these methods can complement the others (e.g., Edlom & Karlsson, 2021). For example, in a study on language

learning experiences in fandom groups, an online survey may help determine areas worth elaborating upon in interviews and identify volunteers for these interviews. On the other hand, interviews and open-ended survey questions can collect the respondents' narratives on their language practices and learning. Furthermore, survey questionnaires may also be used for follow-up *retrospective research*, in which the respondents comment to the interviewer on their particular answer to each question (see, e.g., Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). Such *retrospective research* may be interesting for both the researcher and the respondents, who can reflect upon how a globalized context and digital communication technologies transform their communication practices and impact their social life.

3.4 Grounded theory

Discourse analytic techniques are often used to analyze the obtained qualitative data (see, e.g., Black, 2006; Evans et al., 2017). A helpful inspiration for the content-based thematic analysis of collected narratives may be grounded theory, and particularly, *constructivist* grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 2006; Charmaz, 2006).

Grounded theory does not aim at testing particular hypotheses but instead lets the collected qualitative data guide the investigators in their study of a particular phenomenon or process. Using the analytical strategies proposed by Charmaz (*constructivist* grounded theory) “means responding to emergent questions, new insights, and further information and simultaneously constructing the *method of analysis*, as well as the analysis” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 403). Thus, the analytic strategies may be adjusted throughout the research process if necessary. According to Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory, the researcher and the researched (i.e., research participants) co-construct a theory rather than the researcher “discovers” an objective theory as it emerges from the data (Charmaz, 2006, 2008; c.f. Glaser & Strauss, 2006; Angelone, 2019).

The salient pros of using grounded theory methodological guidelines in studying language learning in online interest groups are, therefore, flexibility, rich data collection, focus on participant perspective (e.g. motivations, learning-related experiences) and inductive approach. These advantages are not unique to grounded theory alone, as it shares the same strengths with virtual ethnography. However, employing a grounded theoretical approach may also have some disadvantages. One of them is that it is time-consuming and challenging. Second, since the analysis of the data depends on the researcher, individual bias may influence data interpretation. Third, research is focused on a particular group and context, and, therefore, the findings cannot be applied to other online interest groups,

which will display other characteristics. Yet, the findings may be a starting point for further research, for example comparative studies.

In recent years several studies on fandom communities have applied or have been influenced by grounded theory. For example, Kim (2021) has drawn on this approach in his research on K-pop fandom in Mexico City and Lima, which proves its usefulness. The usefulness of grounded theory in applied linguistics, including research on language learning, has been discussed by Hadley and Hadley (2024).

4. FINAL COMMENTS

The multilingual character of online communities has significantly changed the way in which the communicative network can be investigated, interpreted, and analyzed, given that their members are free to choose from a broad range of language practices.

While this article provides a review of selected methodological approaches for studying language learning experiences in online fandom communities, it is not exhaustive. The research methods discussed above may offer valuable insights. By combining virtual ethnography with online surveys, interviews, and content analysis inspired by constructive grounded theory researchers may achieve a more complete study.

When employing these methods, it is crucial that researchers remain focused on their research objectives, which should guide both data collection and analysis. Equally important is the selection of online interest-driven groups, whether private or public, that can provide rich and relevant data. What should also be kept in mind is how personal perspectives may influence data collection, interpretation, and research findings, and, therefore, take steps to mitigate potential biases. Given that data collection and analysis often occur simultaneously in grounded theory and virtual ethnography, researchers should remain open and reflective throughout the process. Such a flexible and adaptive approach seems particularly suitable for the research on informal language learning in online fandom groups, considering that language practices, learning, and the literacies of fan members are constantly subject to transformation and evolution.

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Summary

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Keywords: online interest groups; English language; informal language learning; research methods

NIEFORMALNA NAUKA JĘZYKA W WIRTUALNYCH SPOŁECZNOŚCIACH ZAINTERESOWAŃ. PRZEGLĄD WYBRANYCH METOD BADAWCZYCH

Streszczenie

Wirtualne grupy zainteresowań (*online interest groups*) odpowiadają na różne potrzeby społeczne i emocjonalne swoich członków. Web 2.0 pozwala im nie tylko konsumować treści znajdujące się w sieci, ale także tworzyć je i udostępniać. Grupy te mogą zatem również funkcjonować jako społeczności, w których w nieformalny sposób może następować nauka języka, samodzielnie lub z pomocą innych. Te doświadczenia są warte zbadania, biorąc pod uwagę autonomię ucznia w tym procesie, jak również współpracę, jaka czasami zachodzi między członkami społeczności. Celem artykułu jest refleksja nad nauką języka angielskiego w wirtualnych grupach zainteresowań, skupiając się na zaletach i wadach wybranych metod badawczych, takich jak etnografia wirtualna, teoria ugruntowana oraz tzw. metody mieszane (*mixed methods*). Wspomniane metody badawcze mogą być pomocne w badaniach nad nieformalną nauką języka w tych społecznościach, ponieważ mogą one umożliwić przeprowadzenie pogłębionej analizy, prowadząc tym samym do lepszego zrozumienia badanego kontekstu.

Słowa kluczowe: wirtualne grupy zainteresowań; język angielski; uczenie się języka w sposób nieformalny; metody badawcze