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‘Building bridges?’ Investigating perceptions of second language learning affordances in on-line exchanges.

Ensor, S., Rodrigues, C.

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Successive studies (McCloughin, 2007; Kumar, 2008; Narayan & Baglow, 2010) and reports (JISC, 2009; Redecker et al, 2009) have suggested that there is scope for developing new pedagogical approaches linked to informal learning in on-line social networks and participatory spaces of web 2.0. Others (Kellner, 2000; Lankshear, 2006) propose that it is the role of teachers to help learners develop ‘new literacies’ in order to become effective actors in the 21st century.

In the field of foreign language learning, (Sockett & Toffoli, 2010; Ala-Mutka, 2010) recommend that teachers take into account the informal practices of learners online to help them develop their language skills beyond the classroom. Taking an ecological approach on second language (L2) development Ziglari (2008) emphasizes that “it is better to expose learners to real and natural settings”.

Language learning histories as used by Menezes (2011) have revealed the differing perceptions of individuals to language learning “affordances”. Van Lier (2000) underlines the subjective nature of “affordances”. If individuals learn languages in the same way as an animal “learns” the forest, or a plant “learns” the soil, one must first identify the species in order to better care for his/her development.

Palfreyman (2011) and Kurata (2008) have shown the importance of an individual’s off-line social networks in determining L2 learning affordances and strategies. While on-line social networks such as Facebook indeniably have the potential to extend social capital of individuals and thereby the affordances for L2 development, such tools may be also be used simply to mirror and reinforce existing social bonds. As Menezes (2011) points out, a prolonged stay in a foreign country is no guarantee of L2 acquisition.

In this study we will attempt to answer the following question:

Are the perceptions of L2 affordances in on-line exchanges determined by the individuals' off-line social networks and/or their on-line social networks and informal practices?

The CLAVIER project gives 579 students from a British University (BU) and a French University (FU) the opportunity to connect to practice their L2. A Moodle course was the initial meeting point for the students but they have been encouraged to choose their own means of communication and to decide on the type and content of their interactions.

Students from BU and FU have been asked to write and exchange stories reflecting on their experiences in foreign languages and the factors which have influenced their attitudes and behaviours. Two questionnaires will give us further information about their offline and online social networks and informal practices. Twenty of the most active students in the exchange from BU and FU and twenty of the least active students are to be selected. The sample will be chosen on the basis of responses to the questionnaires. A study of interactions and a recorded interview will enable us to further understand their perceptions of L2 affordances in on-line exchanges. Could teachers act as bridging capital to enhance their L2 learning in natural on-line environments?