

Mixed Success on US.Cyworld: Reflections on Korean EFL College Student Efforts to Establish an L2 Presence on an American Social Networking Site

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Abstract

Social networking sites are finding pedagogical application, particularly in developing literacy skills. An intriguing extension of this is to second language acquisition (SLA). I set Hyejeon College freshmen the task of establishing individual homepages on the English-language US.Cyworld.com site, a sister site to the Hangeul Cyworld.com site used by most Korean students. Each student was required to decorate his/her minihome; post English-language content through writing a personal introduction, profile, photo captions, and journal; and establish neighborly links to other student homepages, developing text-based conversations. The intent was to improve second language (L2) Digital Literacy skills, which I have elsewhere identified as a critical issue in SLA of English. But the mixed success the task met with prompts a number of observations. While the L2 use of this social networking site appears well-suited to the more adept EFL student, its suitability for students of low L2 ability and/or motivation is questionable.

1. Introduction

Computer technology and the Internet are revolutionizing social institutions, and their use in pedagogical applications is rapidly accelerating. Social networking sites are a recent phenomenon, with sites such as Myspace showing an enormous growth in popularity. Facebook for example, which is geared to college students, is identified by Downes as being one of the busiest websites on the Internet, in February 2007 drawing more than 5.5 billion page views [1]. Two in five teenagers in the United States currently create content on the web through such portals [2], while in Korea, nearly all Korean students use the Hangeul language Cyworld social networking site. These new technologies both breed and reflect highly significant changes in literacy.

Wilber's theoretical orientation examines literacy from a social and cognitive perspective, regarding literacy as a set of practices that are intertwined with their settings and tools used. These sites and the literary practices they help create constitute a major socio-cultural phenomenon; according to Lankshear & Knobel, while student literacies have become ontologically new by virtue of their use of new technologies, they also represent new paradigms as their skills and proficiencies entail a broader transformation of prior concepts and practices of literacy [3]. Social networking sites are clearly useful in developing communicative skills, and Wilber suggests that it may be time to "... move the writing practices required of our students toward electronically created and connected texts that would bridge student interests and expertise with the development of academic skills." [4]. I suggest that social networking sites also hold considerable potential for second language acquisition (SLA).

In recent papers [5, 6], I have identified L2 Digital Literacy as an important and even critical aspect of developing second language (L2) skills and fluency. Wang and Chen confirm ample anecdotal evidence, that despite their wish to improve their language skills, (in this case distance) second language learners find little opportunity to communicate in the language itself, and become frustrated when they cannot spontaneously converse face-to-face [7]. But Graddol has observed that most usage of English by non-native speakers is actually in communication with other non-native speakers, and not as one might expect with native speakers [8]. This is in accord with the emergent status of English as the first truly global language, as documented by Crystal [9] among others. Within our local SERSC conferences in Korea for example, while the *lingua franca* both written and verbal is English, most attendees are non-native English-speaking. In these conferences Koreans in the main use English to communicate with other Koreans, and with Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Polish, and German

non-native speakers of English - as well as with a few rather fortunate US, Canadian, British, Australian and New Zealand native speakers of English.

Concomitant with the predominant use of “English as a global language” for non-native speakers to communicate with one another, is the exponential growth in computer-mediated communication. Taking into account the numerous digital communications many individuals engage in - whether it be via television, video, cellular telephony, SMS text messaging, instant messaging, chat rooms, online forums, or email correspondence - I intuit that we are fast approaching a threshold where the majority of human communications become computer-mediated. For some, this would already have been reached. At a societal level, reaching this threshold - where it becomes the social norm to communicate via computer and the Internet rather than face-to-face - will have both obvious and unexpected consequences. These far-reaching consequences should be addressed.

Siemens reviews the three established theories of learning, namely of behaviorism, cognitivism and constructivism. All three were developed before learning was impacted by technology, and thereby fail to address key aspects of contemporary learning and knowledge [10]. For example they fail to account for the rapidly shortening half-life of much knowledge, and for the location of knowledge that may no longer be found within the individual, but in digital resources, and/or within organizations. This latter point parallels my own experience of Korean student learning, where I suggest knowledge tends to be localized not within the individual, but within the group mind. Siemens advances the theory of *connectivism* as a theory of learning that can account for these new scenarios, and elsewhere I reaffirm van 't Hooft's assertion of the importance to contemporary pedagogy of connection, collaboration, and networking [11].

In previous papers [5, 6], I documented an EFL task set for L2 students that makes use of a social networking site (albeit comparatively incidentally). Students were asked to make English-language video guides to their campus, using their cell phone videocams. I then posted their videos on my homepage on the social networking site, and asked students to view them there and to post responses to their fellow student videos in my guestbook. In my papers, I suggested the advantages of using the American site US.Cyworld.com, as it is a sister site to the Korean Cyworld.com, which is in Hangeul, and which is enormously popular with Korean students. At the same time, many Korean-Americans use the US.Cyworld site, which currently only supports

English content. I also drew attention to certain shortcomings of this American site.

The present paper documents a further task set Korean freshmen of Hyejeon College, which makes intensive use of this American social networking site. In the Fall semester 2007, I requested of each student in my seven EFL conversation classes that they set up an individual homepage on US.Cyworld.com, and then decorate its “miniroom” (refer Figure 1) and dress its “minime” (an avatar - see Figure 2). They were asked to develop their site using English content, and to make neighborly links with other sites (with their fellow students and with general users of US.Cyworld) and to develop text-based conversations with these other users, through posting to other guestbooks, and replying to comments others had posted in theirs.

In doing this, they needed to use and develop their English skills, not just for creating the content, but critically also to develop and to navigate around the site. It was thus necessary to navigate within their homepage; in relation to my homepage (they were asked to become neighbors with me and to post at least one message in my guestbook); in relation to other homepages (they were asked to establish neighborly links with at least two others); and within the site in general (I encouraged them to visit other randomly chosen homepages, and to explore the site).

This involvement is intended to serve as a means of improving their English skills, both in communicating through their messages and other posts, and importantly in gaining confidence and expertise in navigating in English on the Internet.

However, this necessity of navigating in English caused many students considerable confusion and frustration. An unanticipated problem was that US.Cyworld required applications for personal accounts and associated homepages to be validated - a process that was unfortunately counter-intuitive and complex to perform, as well as to explain. Probably in consequence, a significant number of students did not manage to validate their initial account applications.

A second problem was with decorating their homepages. On creating and validating a new account, the user is credited with 30 acorns - virtual money which can then be used to furnish and decorate their individual homepage miniroom. (Further credits could be obtained by having friends register for the social networking site, or by direct purchase, which I discouraged). While some students performed wonders with their decorative skills, the process of viewing, selecting, purchasing and deploying these items requires the sustained use of significant English skills. A substantial number of students failed to

decorate their miniroom in any manner, or to make any development of their homepages. While I welcomed collaborative efforts, and encouraged the weaker students to get their friends to help them accomplish the task, an uncomfortably large number were either unable or unwilling to develop their site.

The lack of success some students experienced in setting up and developing their sites would in my opinion have been discouraging to them, and thus likely to have impeded their effective learning of English. But on the other hand, I had provided adequate scaffolding, by repeatedly providing demonstrations and explanations in class, using a large video screen with online Internet access. There was also ample opportunity for them to get help from other students with better English skills, and individually from myself as a tutor. It is extremely difficult to decide just where the boundary lies between failure to complete through frustration from plain inability (which I can accept), and giving up too readily through what I presume to be simple laziness (which I cannot). An aspect of the problem is the extreme variation in L2 ability within each class (of about 30 students), ranging from near inability to converse in English, through to near-fluency. This makes it difficult to set tasks that are realizable for the student of lower English ability, without these tasks being facile for the student of higher ability.

2. Reflections and Observations

2.1 Evaluation limitations

A distinct limitation of the US.Cyworld site presented itself when it came time to evaluate student work. The old interface displayed only a few guestbook entries on one page. To capture these for export required navigating to each page and copying and pasting that page, which was labor intensive (and which captured merely the text; minime images could not be captured). While the new interface addresses some of these limitations, instructors need to think well ahead as to how they are going to be able to access the complex linkages and assemblages that students will evolve, in order to be able to adequately and effectively access, archive and evaluate student work.

2.2 Grading Rubric (refer Table 1)

I employed a fairly detailed rubric for assessment, and followed it closely. I was looking for relatively close adherence to the instructions, while being open to evidence of creative thinking. Galloway, in offering preliminary guidelines for developing multimedia for SLA, stresses that language learning is culturally and

socially contextualized [12]. As part of the associated enculturation that accompanies L2 acquisition, I want students to do what I ask them to do, not merely what they think or feel they might care to do. In this I am intentionally approximating the demands of potential native English employers, who will expect performance, and who will likely be intolerant of what they regard as nonperformance. This in a sense crosses the cultural divide between Korean and Western attitudes. In general, Westerners place no great store on group harmony but demand individual competence.

Table 1: Grading Rubric

Students had the entire semester to complete the task, worth 16% of their marks for the course.

A: Students received 8% just to:

2	create an account
1	become my Neighbor
1	leave at least one message in my Guestbook...
1	...which told me who they were, including their name, student ID (07****), and class
3	for the number and quality of their messages
8	SUBTOTAL

B: Students received another 4% to:

1	post a photo and write a story on cover page
1	fill in their profile
1	create and decorate their Minihome, and
1	to become neighbors with at least TWO others (other than US.Cyworld or myself)
4	SUBTOTAL

C: Students received up to 4% more for creativity, depending on their involvement, e.g.:

- making a lovely or interesting Minime,
- building, decorating and furnishing a fine or interesting Minihome;

and for adding English content, e.g.:

- Guestbook dialogues,
- Journal entries,
- Photos with captions, etc.

2.3 Bilingual Navigation

Recently I have been looking for an English language navigation system for driving in Korea, and have been encountering the same kinds of interface problems I experience in navigating Korean websites and in using Korean software. I presume these problems are very similar to those that the students encountered in trying to navigate and develop their English language

homepages. But many of these limitations could be readily overcome by providing bilingual interfaces (though their value for SLA purposes then lessens).

For example, Orkut is an invitation-only service introduced by Google in 2004. Although it enjoys little support in the United States, it is hugely popular in Brazil where more than 70% of its users are based, and Portuguese has been made a second language in its interface [13]. And as an experienced graphic designer, I simply do not understand why software developers do not offer such bilingual interfaces in combination with more extensive use of graphic symbols for navigation of digital resources. At one stroke, the linguistic limitations that non-native speakers encounter are considerably reduced. Visual symbols can be chosen that non-native speakers can readily recognize or learn. The traditional nationalist orientation, which presumes that only individuals of the native culture will use a specific digital resource, is no longer relevant to a globalized environment. As an example of this working well, and in direct contrast to Korean navigation systems, I find I can readily drive across Korea, using road signs which are displayed in English as well as in Hangeul (though sometimes, and in large cities, the signage does prove inadequate).

2.4 An Insightful Interview

A recent interview by a potential employer was revealing of a rural university's institutional ethos. The university president, though charming, disaffected by my inability to speak Korean, and ignoring the incoming government's drive for English-immersion education, suggested that his students needed to be told what they needed to learn in Korean. I would liked to have replied (though courtesy prevented) that I wanted his students to find out what they needed to know in English, that that is the key skill they need to learn. Not a few Korean administrators, teachers of English, and students seem to expect English to be reduced to their limited image of it - and to be rather intolerant if it is not (perhaps it stems from an understandable frustration). But a foreign language exists *a priori*, and they need to master it, not by accommodating it to them, but by accommodating themselves to it. Unfortunately, their unrealistic attitude is commonly found in Korean EFL pedagogy, where Korean teachers of English frequently supply English answers to their students, which negates the need to learn on the student's part. Students seem unable to think for themselves when asked to respond in class, but compensate by prompting one another. This behavior might in part be traced to child-rearing patterns, which overly indulge the child, to the point

where they do not have to deal with reality. Whilst that attitude is understandable in infancy, I suggest that it is profoundly counter-productive in young adulthood.

2.5 Change, change, change

Fader observes that social network sites are powerful but mercurial, that the forces that make a hot site are difficult to quantify; and that any currently popular site could become the next outcast overnight with rapid mass migration of users [14]. Similar rapid change can also characterize site interfaces. Towards the end of our semester-long task, US.Cyworld on short notice radically reformatted their interface. Fortunately I was able to capture most data and could grade student work before this took place, but some non-essential data seems to have been lost, most notably student neighbor linkages and host responses to guestbook comments. This interface change may also have affected the ability of my students to navigate around the site, and possibly their confidence.

3. Conclusion

My experience with this task confirms that L2 social networking sites have considerable value for second language acquisition. But before setting the task, instructors need to inspect the site thoroughly from a pragmatic perspective, and determine to what degree it will facilitate or hinder effective capturing and archiving of student work for evaluation. It is vital to ensure that each of the students involved establishes a direct linkage (such as a neighborly relation) with the instructor, in order to enable the instructor to be able to easily locate their work, to check on their progress, and to make a final evaluation. The ease of navigation throughout the site for an L2 user needs to be carefully considered beforehand, with the parity between ease of navigation and student L2 ability needing to be realistically assessed. Where a significant proportion of the class is likely to have inadequate L2 ability to cope with the task, it should not be set as such, as considerable frustration will very likely follow. However, when the ability of the student matches well with the difficulty of the task, and student motivation is high, very encouraging results are probable. In such cases, students are likely to spontaneously elect to remain on the sites after task completion, and maintain and develop the online identities and relationships they have established. This will help their development of L2 fluency, through strengthening valuable L2 digital literacy skills that they can use for L2 computer-mediated communication, and should help them integrate more readily into the target global culture.

Table 2: Selection of student messages posted in my guestbook, together with my responses. The messages required laborious reformatting and reordering by student and date to prepare for evaluation.

0703021	Nov 17, 5:00 am	0703021 hi professor_ How are you? can you throw off cold? take care of yore health. I send TASK THREE to you e-mail!!!! to do my best!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Merry Christms too!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
rmeurant	Nov 26, 10:52 pm	- Great minime! No cold at present...
0703021	Oct 02, 8:07 am	0703021 hi professor you say that English content.. do you mean that photo or videos contents write to update in English? i'm sorry behave in an annoying way to you
rmeurant	Oct 07, 5:21 am	- No problem, just try to use English where possible, e.g. descriptions of photos. maybe a journal.
0703021	Sep 18, 11:12 pm	0703021 hi i'm rhim sohyun ~ task 1 is just setting my home page?
rmeurant	Sep 20, 12:03 am	- Yes, So-Hyun, but I want you to add English content...
0730013	Sep 05, 5:39 am	0730013 Hellow Professor My name is young ju I'm attend a lecture a monday at 12:20 pm I don't seak English very well so be strained at English conversation class if you help me i appreciate it very much um..... see you again~;;;
rmeurant	Sep 06, 6:38 am	- See you again, Young-Ju
0741073	Oct 08, 6:10 am	0741073 Hellow!! robert teacher. My name is Yeon-Hee Kim. Im here in B class thank you
rmeurant	Oct 08, 8:38 pm	- Hi, Yeon-Hee.
0741073	Nov 05, 4:43 am	0741073 Hi Mr.Robert~! I'm Yeon-Hul Kim. Do you remember me? I'm student of Hye Jeon college. I'm first grade. Um... I like your instruction very much. So, I promised myself. "I'll study English harder!" Thank you Mr.Robert Have a nice night.
rmeurant	Nov 12, 9:01 pm	- That's a great sentiment, Yeon-Hul, study English harder!
0741151	Oct 04, 11:12 pm	0741151 Hello. I am E Class Park Chang sun. I made my account again because I lost the one I made last week. By the way, the acorns are not coming in. Give me them. lol. Let's go drink beers some time. I love Robert. ki ki ki ^^
rmeurant	Oct 07, 5:10 am	- Chang-Sun, if you have registered and validated your account, your 30 acorns should have been credited to you automatically.
0741151	Oct 07, 8:17 am	- ok! I have acoruns. thank youkiki. Do you have visit in my minihome?
0741247	Nov 20, 3:11 am	0741247 Hi Robert I take to Class B Lee Dong Hawn. How are you? kikiki now your homework finished. i'm sorry... it letter is first... i love Rorert ^ ^ see you again
rmeurant	Nov 26, 10:54 pm	- I'm fine, thanks, DongHwan.
0741249	Nov 23, 8:22 pm	0741249 hi robert ~ I take to B class it's letter first letter~ i'm sorry....
rmeurant	Nov 26, 10:44 pm	- That's OK, just try, that's all I ask...
0741384	Nov 25, 4:38 pm	0741384 Hi Robert~~~~~ My Name Oh sung Class A English is oh my god.... I want to speak English well youhandsome guy~ wow!!!!!!!!!!!!
rmeurant	Nov 26, 10:44 pm	- And so young!
0795003	Oct 08, 8:44 am	0795003 hi~~!! Robert My name is kwak hee jung Me class is D Robert study it is fun and but English it is difficult too Robert study it enters well and it wants dialogging with Robert and English
rmeurant	Oct 08, 8:45 pm	- Hi, Hee-Jung, good luck with your English dialogue.



Figure 1: Smile7721's student minihome decorated using items bought with virtual acorn money

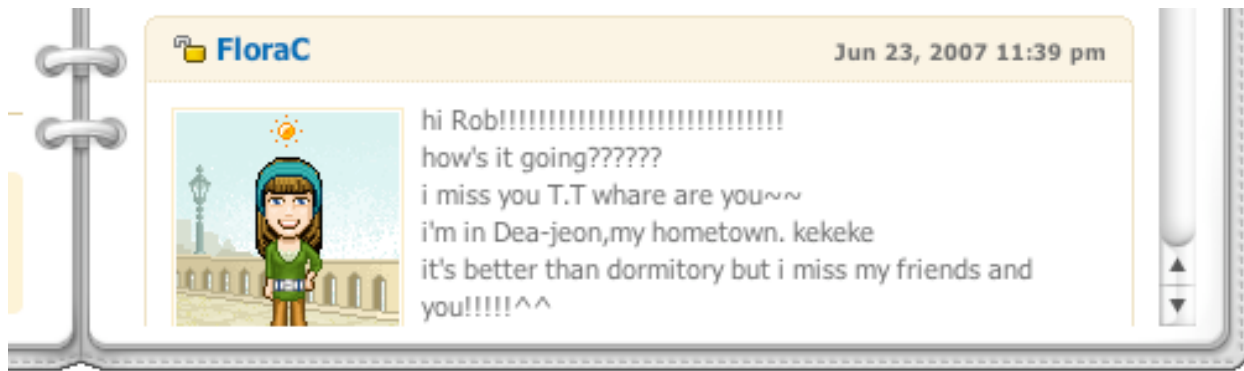


Figure 2: Post from FloraC in my Guestbook showing user-dressed Minime (old interface)

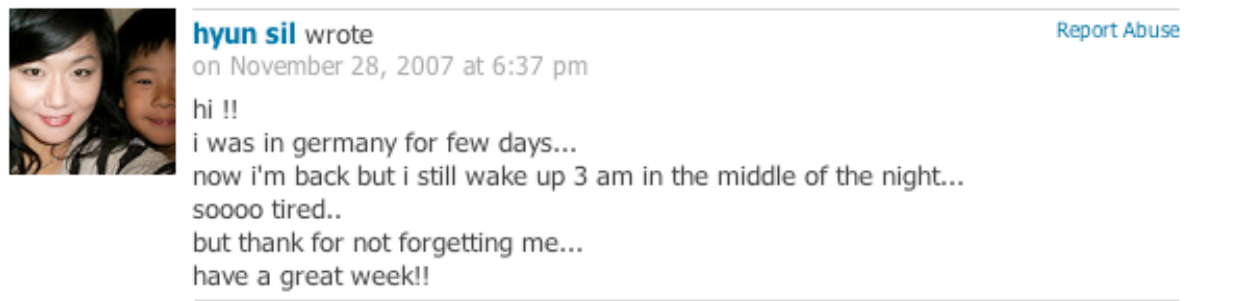


Figure 3: One of 132 messages in Kijeong's Guestbook (new interface, with host's responses missing)

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