Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

An examination of the intersection between technology and language learning is an overwhelming endeavor. In narrowing the scope of this general topic it is perhaps better to examine the intersection of emergent technologies and language learning, whereby we can elaborate on the specific pertinent technologies. This can effectively undergo a binary division, between CALL (computer assisted language learning) and MALL (mobile [device] assisted language learning). Yet this is only one of other possible divisions, as CALL offers elements such as CMC (computer mediated communication), virtual worlds, and gaming. Within the literature, while MALL is typically considered a learner-centered (class and 'teacherless') modality, CALL, in the majority of the literature, is examined as an element within an educationally defined setting. With regards to technology, this study will focus on CALL rather than MALL.

The Internet and the various platforms which it has enabled have impacted virtually every aspect of our lives, and second language learning is no exception. Language teachers have come to embrace CALL technology, and the computer laboratory, complete with language learning activities, has become a standard feature in nearly every language school around the world. Likewise, learners have come to embrace the learning opportunities engendered by the advent of the Internet. Many learners have to a great extent begun to make use of various Internet-mediated platforms, from social media to chat to games, pursuing these activities in their target second language, not to mention revising material learned in the classroom on sites dedicated to the practice of specific grammar points or lexical sets.

Without exception, authors of studies related to CALL have positive, optimistic things to say about the current state and the future of technology-enhanced or mediated language learning. Studies fall into both qualitative and quantitative categories, and some of the documents referenced in the literature review of this study are themselves literature reviews. As this is a constantly emerging field, many studies effectively try to broadly define 'state-of-the-art' at the time of publication, to the detriment of delving deeper into any singular, particular aspect. Others however involve esoteric examinations of single aspects of one specific modality.

What most of the literature shares in common however is that it is relegated to an etic approach, a teacher's rather than a learner's view, towards the usefulness of various media in language learning. While this research will examine a broad scope of related technologies, the focus will be on CALL, and more specifically, Internet-mediated experiences, but from the perspective of MALL in the sense that it is in

search of the emic, autonomous ('teacherless') learner-centered learning experiences engendered.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This research was carried out in search of emic, autonomous ('teacherless') learner-centered learning experiences engendered through Internet-mediated experiences. The goal, or framework of this research, was to address these three questions:

Firstly, from the emic perspective, in the process of non-instructed, Internet-mediated L2 activity, what activities enable *agency* and best encapsulate the elements of both *play* and *positive affect* while leading to L2 acquisition? 'Internet-mediated L2 activities' includes a broad spectrum of modalities available for L2 activity on the Internet, ranging from chat to blogging, games, and others, as will be discussed further in the literature review portion of this document. The focus here is both on gaining insights into the mechanisms of the technology and the user experience of such technologies.

Secondly, does this emic perspective differ depending on the specific L2 being acquired through non-instructed, Internet-mediated L2 activity, and do similarities also occur? The two L2 being examined here are Thai and English.

Thirdly, does the L2 acquisition process, regardless of the target L2, basically proceeds in a similar fashion in an Internet-mediated environment? If some differences do exist, these can then be seen as areas in which any conclusions regarding Thai L2 acquisition may not be transferrable to English L2 acquisition, and vice versa. It may also be interesting to consider whether such possible differences result from differences in the target L2, or differences in the cultural and technical knowledge backgrounds of the participants. If similarities exist in some areas, these may be areas in which any observations or conclusions are transferable and applicable to any L2.

1.3 Scope of the Study

There were two aspects to the research, each serving slightly differing objectives. The first aspect involved two groups – one of English and the other of Thai language learners. Research was undertaken in order to gain insight into the means by which they experience L2 language use and learning through Internet-mediated experiences, as well as the emotional character of those experiences, by means of surveys and interviews. The second aspect comprised an ethnographic study, with the researcher as sole participant observer, in order to examine from an emic perspective the researcher's second language (Thai) learning experience through Internet mediation (using both mobile device and computer). The instruments for this ethnography included a detailed daily learning log as well as traces of the researcher's activity comprising blog posts and chat dialog transcripts. The time frame for this research was a three month period. The areas of focus for both aspects of this study were particularly in regards to discovering and documenting which varieties of internet-mediated language-use experience generate 1.the greatest amount of *positive affect*, and 2.the deepest sense of both *agency* and *play*, while contributing towards language acquisition. In seeking the greatest usefulness of data generated through the

two aspects of research, I not only compared and contrasted, but also looked for similar themes between online L2 learning experiences, in English or Thai, using the different instruments for triangulation of data.

Because of the nature of the research, study location was irrelevant. The relevance to this research regarding location was that it be conducted by means of Internet, on a computer or mobile device with Thai font capacity (e.g. Thai Windows platform installed) and, in the case of MMOGs, on a local Thai server. Regardless, the researcher conducted the bulk of his research in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

1.4 Significance of the Study

In this current time period, during which the advent of the Internet has transformed so many aspects of our lives, and continues to do so to greater degrees, second language learning is also being transformed. Greater numbers of learners seek to further acquire or practice their chosen language every day, and more and more sites dedicated to the learning of languages, particularly English, each often more sophisticated than what came before it, continue to proliferate on the Internet. Efficacy studies "showed that students who took all or part of their classes online performed better than those in traditional face-to-face learning environments." Students in hybrid courses did best. According to studies cited, the greatest value lies in that OLL environments "stimulate students to spend more time engaged with the second language (L2) materials" (Blake, 2011, p. 21).

Furthermore, based upon review of the literature concerning Internet-based second language usage, acquisition and learning, it is clear that most researchers have approached the topic from an etic perspective, typically from a teacher's or learning platform designer's point of view. The emic perspective – the learner's, or second language Internet user's perspective, is distinctly absent. There is a distinct gap in the research which this study seeks to at least partially fill.

Such a study, regardless of the specific L2 pursued, has a number of significant implications for the field of TESOL as a whole. First of all, it adds to the body of knowledge regarding agency and positive effect in relation to L2 acquisition experiences, thus pointing both teachers and learners towards the keys for more affective and effective learning. Secondly, such a study sheds light on whether Internet-mediated environments can leverage both play and learner agency, providing possibly more, or better, learning experiences than those available in traditional classroom settings. Finally, such a study points towards greater knowledge in the pursuit of providing ideal Internet-mediated learning experiences, both independent of and mediated by a teacher, for learners of all abilities and styles, and possibly towards new play and game oriented classroom methodologies as well. The first aspect of the study gauges the possibility of any broad differences (or demonstrates similarities) between Internet-mediated L2 acquisition in English and Thai; and the second provides deep, rich and nuanced insights into such experience.

1.5 Definitions of Key Terms

Agency – for the purposes of this study I define agency as a sixth freedom: the participant's freedom to participate when and how he wishes.

Conjecture – as it is used in the third research question, conjecture is not merely guesswork, but rather "the products of creative imagination" (Deutsch, 2011, p. 26), and "the real source of our theories" (p. 32), thus, a starting point for potential new knowledge.

Internet-mediated experiences – any experience achieved through use of the Internet, either by computer (desktop, laptop), or mobile device (hand phone, tablet). For the purposes of this study, the emphasis is on any such experiences which primarily occur through, rely on, or make use of the second language (from here on, L2) (Thai or English) as a medium for instruction, communication, consumption, creation or play.

Learner – while a 'learner' might normally be considered one actively and consciously engaged in the process of learning, in this study I have broadened this definition to also include those persons involved in activities in which one may simply be using their L2 online, for communicative or other purposes, and not consider themselves in an active learning phase at the time.

Play – While a definition of play is highly elusive, I follow a combination of criteria for play as outlined by a number of authors. These comprise five freedoms noted by Klopfer, Osterwell and Salen (2009): "1. freedom to fail; 2. freedom to experiment; 3. freedom to fashion identities; 4. freedom of effort; and 5. freedom of interpretation" (4) Additionally, I make use of the concepts of play as a point midway between freedom and boredom, and as an activity characterized by the phenomenon of *flow* experience (Csikszentmihályi, 1971, 2007).

Positive affect – refers to positive emotion, in all forms. While this study aims to identify possible triggers of positive affect, I also make note of occurrences of negative affect, possibly pointing towards the experiential or technical deficiencies that trigger them.

Second language acquisition – For the purpose of this study, second language acquisition is defined as "the study of how second languages are used. …it is the study of the acquisition of a non-primary language" (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p.1). Moreover, "Second language acquisition is not about pedagogy unless the pedagogy affects the course of acquisition" (p. 2).