

## Online Social Media and Informal Language Learning

CHAN Nikita

Language Centre, Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (Tsing Yi)

The rapid development and globalisation of social media services such as YouTube has opened up new opportunities for informal learning. These opportunities are especially valuable to young English language learners in Asia, where opportunities for face-face-interaction with English-speakers have traditionally been limited. Benson and Chan (2010) did an exploratory study investigating language-related interactions in users' comments on a fansubbed video-clip of the 2008 Olympics song, Beijing Welcomes You (北京歡迎你), from the perspective of informal teaching and learning. The study found evidence of potential teaching and learning episodes related to:

- (a) Translation (users discussed if the lyric was being translated properly)
- (b) Language usage (users raised questions about pronunciation)
- (c) Relationships between language and culture (users discussed the differences of various languages; users commented on culture issues)
- (d) Teaching and learning processes (users shared their language learning or teaching experiences).

The evidence presented in the exploratory study is, no doubt, no more than the tip of an iceberg that will be further revealed through future research. For its implications, the key issues raised concern not only the emergence of new avenues for language teaching and learning, but also the emergence of new configurations of language teaching and learning practices in areas such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and other parts of Asia where learners have traditionally lacked opportunities to use the foreign languages they are learning, while they are learning them. Many of our assumptions about English language teaching in Asia, for example, are based on an assumption that the students lack concurrent opportunities to use English outside the classroom and are learning English for use later in their lives. In this context, Thorne (2008, p.307) has suggested that "within language education, internet-mediated communication is no longer a proxy activity but is itself the real thing", by which he means that participation in internet-mediated communication is increasingly becoming a purpose for language learning, in which learners can engage in language at the same time as they are learning it. If it is indeed the case that concurrent English language learning and use are becoming the norm around the world, TESOL practitioners will face important challenges in the future, both in relation to what and how we teach in the classroom and in relation to how we articulate students' in-class activities with their out-of-class language learning and use.

### References:

- Benson, P. & Chan, N. (2010). TESOL after YouTube: Fansubbing and informal language learning. *Taiwan Journal of TESOL*, 7(2), 1 – 24.
- Thorne, S.L. (2008). Transcultural communication in open internet environments and massively multiplayer online games. In S. Magnan (Ed.), *Mediated Discourse Online* (pp. 305 – 327). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.