

Ethical Challenges in Internet-based Research on Language Learners' Autonomous Learning: Personal reflections

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I have been always interested in knowing more about learners who learn English beyond the confines of classrooms. According to my experience, these learners exist in large numbers on the Chinese mainland. It is also my belief that their language learning experiences will be of interest to both researchers and teachers who wish to promote autonomous learning among language learners. For instance, it may interest teachers to know how these learners sustain their autonomous learning efforts and what kind of beliefs they have in the learning process. Since they do not sit in our classrooms, such research presents enormous challenges as these learners are often difficult to access. Even if we can have face-to-face interviews with them, they may refrain from saying things openly before researchers, particularly in cultural contexts like China. However, these problems have now become at least partially solvable due to the spread of the internet. As “the Internet has qualitatively transformed [...] everyday communication and information practices [...] and interpersonal realms” (Thorne & Black, 2007, p. 2), many language learners use the internet to discuss their learning problems and share their learning experiences. Consequently, their online activities provide a useful means for us to explore their autonomous learning.

The internet as a methodological alternative

Though the internet is a messy and chaotic place, internet-based research has obvious

advantages. It can help generate valuable data without the effort having to be made to transcribe them as is the case with those collected using traditional offline methods such as interview and observation (Robson & Robson, 2002). It also helps researchers access participants who are difficult to contact (Madge, 2007). Indeed, the internet can be considered both the site and the means for doing research on a variety of issues related to autonomous learning (Gao, 2006). For instance, one might examine how language learners' use of the internet contributes to their autonomous learning. Research could also be done on the kind of problems and difficulties experienced by these learners. In addition, how they deal with these challenges as revealed in their online sharings could inform the kind of pedagogical support that we decide to give to learners in our classrooms. For these reasons, I took advantage of the internet in two studies in order to have a better understanding of autonomous learners on the Chinese mainland (Gao, 2007 & 2008).

In the first study (Gao, 2007), I analysed a strand of discussion posts in a web forum and explored how such discussion mediated the participants' autonomous learning efforts in an English club. The discussion, titled ‘a tale of Blue Rain Café’, was a collective effort among the club members to reflect on their participation. The second study (Gao, 2008) is an inquiry into a discussion by a group of unidentified Chinese netizens' about what constitute the best ways to learn English in China. In both studies, the

internet was an indispensable means for doing the research but it also presented problems, in particular, ethical challenges, for me to address. When I was undertaking these studies, the university had just begun to introduce a system to regulate ethical research behaviour among its staff and research students. Luckily, I was exempted from the ethical review process because the system did not cover research students who already had their candidature confirmed before the implementation date. Nevertheless, I find it beneficial to reflect on ethical issues in the process of undertaking the two studies.

Ethical issues in internet-based research

In general, ethical considerations in offline research require researchers to deal with at least the following questions throughout the research process (Barnes, 2004; Madge, 2007; Robson & Robson, 2002):

- Shall we obtain informed consent from the research participants?
- How can such consent be obtained?
- Shall we take measures to protect the participants' online identities in reporting?
- How can we achieve reciprocity in internet-based inquiries?

These questions may have straightforward answers in offline research, but they constitute enormous challenges for researchers in internet-based research as "the computer stands 'between and betwixt' categories of alive/not alive, public/private, published/non-published, writing/speech, interpersonal/mass communication and identified/anonymous" (Madge 2007, p.656). For instance, researchers may disagree with each other over the issue as to whether informed consent is needed because web forums could be regarded as public spaces (Denzin, 1999). Even if informed consent is considered necessary, researchers still have to cope with other difficulties as to whether consent has to be obtained from each online participant and

how such consent can be obtained, given that many participants having multiple online identities (Madge, 2007). Since many online communities have fluid membership, researchers may find it particularly difficult to keep regularly asking for consent from members in these communities (Barnes, 2004). There is also a wide gap between researchers' interests in doing research and participants' interests as members of particular online communities. Indeed, all these issues posed serious problems in my own studies, which I continue by considering in more depth below.

Reflections on the two studies

Among the many ethical issues that I faced in the two studies, I found it extremely challenging to deal with the questions as to how I could obtain the participants' informed consent and how I achieve reciprocity with them in the research process.

Although the web forum in Gao (2007) is also open to all visitors, those who participated in the discussion about their autonomous learning efforts in the English club had indisputable ownership of their experiences, the focal issue of the study. For this reason, I initially wanted to seek individual participants' consent by contacting them through their registered email addresses. However, most of them did not put valid email addresses in their online profiles, probably because they did not expect to be contacted that way. Therefore, I posted a message to the forum about my intended research in order to seek participant consent. I told them that I was touched by reading their discussion posts and wished to write about their experiences so that other people in the world could learn about their experiences. As many participants wanted to achieve some sense of permanence to their learning narratives, it appealed to them that their stories of the English learning community might have some chance to appear in print. However, I still failed to

obtain endorsement from all the individual participants in the forum. For this reason, I wrote to two participants who appeared to be the leaders of the English club in the web forum. They spoke on behalf of the club and encouraged me to carry on my writing. In the forum, I posted my preliminary interpretations of these learning narratives and sought confirmation from the participants. In later reporting the findings, I changed their online identities by giving them other internet names. When the paper was published, I sent a soft copy to the community leaders.

The web forum in Gao (2008) has a wider, much more geographically dispersed audience, and it also has highly fluid membership. For years, I have, like many other participants, been daily browsing different threads of discussion and occasionally participating in the discussions that take place. Unlike the forum in the first study, most of the discussions in the second forum are related to current affairs in China and the world. That is why I was particularly struck by a newly posted thread of discussion on what constitute the best ways to learn English in China. The discussion was started by a netizen who desperately needed advice on how to learn English more efficiently. Like many other discussions in the forum, this one lasted no more than four days and quickly 'sunk' to the unfathomable bottom of the internet. By the time I decided to do an analysis of the discussion, it had already been abandoned by the participants several months earlier.

Having none of the participants' email addresses, I did not have the means to contact them to obtain their consent. There were also no community leaders to contact as the discussion was not moderated. For this reason, my ethical considerations were largely related to questions as to whether the web forum could be considered a public space and whether a scholarly presentation of their views on learning English was likely to undermine their

interests. Though none of them intended their messages to be used in academic research, they did make their quest for the best ways to learn English in China known in a public space. As many of these posts indicated that these netizens were not satisfied with their language learning experiences in schools, an analysis of the discussion would help language teachers and researchers support such language learners' learning efforts inside and outside classrooms. In this sense, these participants shared similar aims to that of the researcher. In writing the report, I also made efforts to hide their internet identities. Nevertheless, I may still be accused of violating basic offline ethical research principles, such as failing to obtain consent from the participants.

An invitation for further discussion

As internet-based research will become a vibrant methodological alternative in language learning research, I feel that there is a need to discuss various issues associated with it, in particular, ethical research behaviour. However, by undertaking an ethical discussion in internet-based inquiries, I do not attempt to advance a set of procedural ethical principles that language learning researchers need to comply with when undertaking internet-based research. Though there are many advantages in having a set of procedural guidelines to promote ethical research behaviour, ethical guidelines are often subject to interpretation in specific research contexts by researchers holding different philosophical positions (Hammersley, 2006). Moreover, ethical challenges may become much more complicated if the varying characteristics of different internet research sites are considered. For instance, a study examining exchanges in a private discussion forum will have different ethical considerations in comparison with an inquiry analysing reposted email messages from private email addresses. Research in a text-based web forum also

differs in its ethical requirements from exploring learner interaction in a 3D online environment where individuals use avatars (that is, three-dimensional models or icons) to represent themselves in the virtual world (Williams, 2007). Probably the nature of internet settings for a particular inquiry has to be determined before discussing what ethical issues are at stake. Consequently, drawing up another set of prescriptive ethical guidelines to regulate research behaviour online will very likely not do much good. What is needed most is probably a collegial discussion that aims to heighten our critical awareness of the consequences of research activities upon research participants and encourage us to act on this awareness when conducting internet-based research on, and with, autonomous learners.

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