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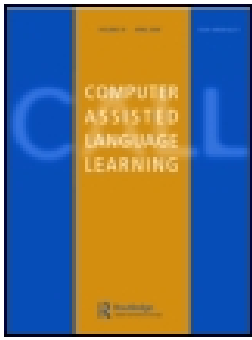
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Digital affordances on WeChat: learning Chinese as a second language

Li Jin 

Department of Modern Languages, DePaul University, Chicago, IL, USA

ABSTRACT

Different from the traditional term language input, affordance, an ecological term, has been deployed to analyze the perceived opportunities for second language (L2) learning an environment provides to L2 learners. L2 learning occurs only when the semiotic resources in the environment resonate with the learner's capacities such as their abilities, aptitudes, and attitudes. Adopting affordance as a theoretical and analytic construct, this study investigates using qualitative research methods what language development affordances WeChat, one of the most popular Social Networking Systems in Chinese-speaking communities, provided to two university-level Chinese language learners while they were studying abroad in an intensive language program in Shanghai. Four affordances were identified. The results also show that each affordance was manifested differently with each language learner due to unique communication norms on WeChat, each language learner's Chinese language proficiency, and their personal preference in WeChat communication. Pedagogical implications are also provided to guide educators and L2 users as to how to take advantage of WeChat for language learning.

KEYWORDS

Affordance; Chinese as a second language; study abroad; WeChat; social networking sites

Introduction

Digital technologies are ubiquitous in our daily life nowadays. A review of the research (e.g. McBride, 2009; Wang & Vasquez, 2012) shows that various Web 2.0 technologies, particularly social networking sites (SNSs), have been optimistically integrated into second language (L2) curriculum. Because of the unique communicative opportunities afforded by these SNSs, there is growing interest in uncovering L2 learners' participation and linguistic development within these sites. Empirical studies (e.g. Black, 2008, 2009; Chen, 2013; Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2013; Mills, 2011; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011; Schreiber, 2015) have discovered that L2 learners negotiate meanings and forge relationships or membership while interacting with other L2 learners and users in SNSs. This line of

research also reveals that L2 learners actively explore and form L2 or even translingual identities by using various semiotic resources afforded in these online communities to transform into L2 users.

Most studies (e.g. Black, 2008, 2009; Chen, 2013; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011; Schreiber, 2015) conducted in this area focus on English language learners (ELLs) using English-language-dominated SNSs such as Facebook and online fan communities. Research on learners of less commonly taught languages in various SNSs, whether in their home country or in the target country, is scant (Diao, 2014; Wang & Vasquez, 2012). There are more than 700 million active Chinese social media users on several major Chinese SNSs. Research shows over 90% of Internet users in China are using SNSs (China Internet Network Information Center, 2016), which renders using SNSs a must in daily life. Despite these facts, very little is known as to what opportunities these Chinese SNSs afford to learners of Chinese as a second language (CSL).

This study aims to answer one question: what affordances for language development might WeChat, the most popular SNS in Chinese speaking communities around the world, offer for CSL learners? The study is guided by an ecological and sociocultural approach to second language learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Lier, 2004). From this perspective, L2 learning is viewed as a significant human activity that is constantly mediated by various semiotic resources in the environment. L2 development only occurs when the resources available in the environment resonate with learners' skills and abilities, which is when affordances emerge. Qualitative methods are adopted to analyze data from two American college-level Chinese language learners who were required to use WeChat while participating in a seven-week intensive summer study abroad program in Shanghai.

Literature review

This section reviews the literature of an ecological and sociocultural view of L2 learning as well as empirical studies on the use of SNSs in L2 teaching and learning, especially in CSL.

An ecological and sociocultural view of second language acquisition (SLA)

Diverting from traditional cognitivist SLA theories such as behaviorism and cognitive interactionism (e.g. Long, 1985), language learning viewed from an ecological and sociocultural perspective is a meaning-making activity and involves perception, action, interaction, relation and environment (van Lier, 2004). The ecological and sociocultural perspective in SLA is developed out of sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Lier, 2004). Through the lens of sociocultural theory, all human activities are mediated by physical and psychological tools such as language and other symbolic signs. Language learning is a significant human activity mediated by various semiotic resources in the environment.

Learners are therefore viewed as active agents constantly construing and constructing the meaning-making activities. Feeling constrained by the traditional term language input, van Lier (2000) introduces ‘affordance,’ an ecological term (Gibson, 1991) defined as the perceived opportunities for action an environment provides to the observer. van Lier (2004) further stresses that affordance, in contrast to ‘input’, emphasizes the learner’s agency in perception and action and is dynamic and emerging out of the interactions between the learner and the environment. L2 learning occurs only when the semiotic resources in the environment resonate with the learner’s capacities such as their abilities, aptitudes, and attitudes. For example, a movie in the target language may afford culturally and linguistically rich materials to an advanced-level learner whereas it may merely afford cultural images and sporadic language chunks to a beginning-level learner. Thus, learners have different opportunities or gains from using the same learning resource. Therefore, it is more meaningful to investigate language affordances rather than resources existing in the environment when learning and development are the focus of attention.

Only recently has affordance as a conceptual construct started to attract more attention in SLA research. A few studies in L2 education (e.g. Darhower, 2008; Hoven & Palalas, 2011; Miller, 2005; Rama, Black, van Es, & Warschauer 2012; Thoms, 2014; Thoms & Poole, 2017) have operationalized this construct. In her dissertation on ESL students’ engagement in writing revision activities, Miller (2005) distinguishes the affordance-rich environment from the affordance-constrained environment. An affordance-rich classroom offers organization, an abundant feedback loop, and active learner agency whereas an affordance-constrained classroom lacks these qualities. In an attempt to explore and operationalize the affordance construct in a L2 literature classroom, Thoms (2014) discovers salient affordances in three types of teacher reformulations: access-creating, funneling, and content-enhancing.

Affordance has also been used as an analytic construct in CALL research. With a focus on text chat-based telecollaboration between American learners of Spanish and Puerto Rican learners of English, Darhower (2008) discovers that L2 learners provide various linguistic affordances including nonnative-like affordances to each other, but very often fail to notice these affordances due to their limited abilities. In a pilot study to investigate language learning via mobile devices in an ESP course, Hoven and Palalas (2011) propose to use a new learning theory called ecological constructivism in situated and context-based learning facilitated with mobile devices. They discover that mobile devices (e.g. iPod touch) afford flexibility, on-demand retrieval, and access to resources for language learning. Rama et al. (2012) compare two college-level Spanish learners’ experiences participating in the Spanish version of the massive multi-player online game (MMOGs) World of Warcraft. They discover that the design of the game, cultural norms in the game, and participants’ own abilities collectively afford distinct opportunities for language learning to the two participants. There

exist three affordances: allowing for the formation of safe learning and language spaces, emphasizing communicative competence, and promoting goal-directed, collaborative action between experts and novices. Adopting Darhower's (2008) definition of linguistic affordance, Thoms and Poole (2017) identify three distinct affordances in learner-learner interactions when using a digital annotations tool in L2 collective reading: linguistic, literary, and social affordances. They also discover that the literary and social affordances outnumber the linguistic affordances due to the primary goal of the learning task. These studies suggest affordance is a very useful analytical construct that helps to identify unique opportunities for each language learner even when they are immersed in the same learning environment.

SNSs and SLA

In light of the growing popularity of SNSs, a large number of empirical studies have investigated L2 learning within SNSs (e.g. Black, 2008, 2009; Blattner & Fiori, 2009, 2011; Chen, 2013; Diao, 2014; Klimanova & Dembovskaia, 2013; McBride, 2009; Mills, 2011; Rinehardt & Zander, 2011; Schreiber, 2015). Black's (2008, 2009) studies investigate English language learners' (ELLs) participation in online fan communities to co-construct new identities via language use. The results show that ELLs could take advantage of the tools available in fan fiction communities to construct identities that are not ascribed to them in formal L2 classroom settings. Klimanova and Dembovskaia (2013) discover that their L2 learners of Russian in communication with their Russian pen pals take advantage of the multimodal resources in a Russian-language SNS to negotiate and develop dynamic L2 learner-user identities. In their review of studies on L2 use, socialization, and learning in online communities and gaming, Thorne, Black, and Sykes (2009) enthusiastically claim that participation in online fan communities and gaming helps 'strengthen the ecological linkages between forms of language use and identity dispositions' (p. 815) in various L2 contexts.

Other researchers have investigated L2 learning on popular SNSs such as Facebook. Blattner and Fiori (2009, 2011) discover that French language learners can develop sociopragmatic awareness and multiliteracy skills when engaging in communication with Francophone Facebook users. Chen (2013) and McBride (2009) both observe that L2 learners can use social networking technologies to develop new literacies, pragmatic competence, build relationships, experiment with multiple identities, and practice self-authorship. Using a situated learning theoretical perspective, Mills's (2011) study analyzes the joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire experienced within a Facebook community of an intermediate French class. Mills discovers that students in this community made connections to course content and developed online identities as well as relationships through their participation. Adopting a language socialization perspective, Rinehardt and Zander (2011) discover that many ELLs in their

Facebook-based class community develop Facebook-mediated identities as users of English. However, some students resist the notion that gaming and everyday use of Facebook is an acceptable way to learn English. The researchers conclude that social networking use in classroom activities may afford unique learning opportunities to some learners, but may make learning unsettling for other learners who are unfamiliar with this practice. In addition, Chen (2013) and Schreiber (2015) point out that L2 educators should re-examine the importance of multiliteracies that our L2 learners develop in SNSs. These should not be dismissed in formal language education.

The current research on CSL learning on SNSs is far more scant. In one pioneering study on this topic, Diao (2014) investigates two college-level American students of Mandarin Chinese who use Weibo, one of the most popular SNSs in China, while participating in a study abroad program in Shanghai. The two students had little engagement on Weibo and developed limited Chinese Internet linguistic awareness by the end of their study abroad program. The researcher reasons that the CSL learners under investigation are more interested in real-life social networking than an online social network where they have a limited number of friends.

To fill a void in this line of research, the current study investigated from an ecological and sociocultural theoretical perspective the language development affordances two college-level American students during a summer study abroad program in Shanghai experienced on WeChat, the most popular SNS in Chinese speaking communities around the world (Chinese Internet Network Information Center, 2016).

Context of the study

The study was part of a larger study conducted during a 7-week summer intensive language study abroad program at a major university in Shanghai. This program was tailor-made for a group of American students of Mandarin Chinese from one American university. Two levels of classes were offered: an intermediate-level class for three students who successfully finished one full academic year of Chinese language classes on the US campus and an advanced-level class for four students who finished a minimum of two full academic years of Chinese language classes on the US campus prior to the study abroad program.

The university is located in southwestern Shanghai and a half-hour subway ride away from downtown Shanghai. Students stayed in a hotel located within a walking distance from campus. During the seven weeks, students attended formal classes at 8:00–11:30 am from Monday to Thursday in addition to a review session and a weekly test on Friday morning each week. The morning sessions focused on learning and practicing content covered in the textbooks. Each class had two instructors: the first instructor focused on content learning and grammar instruction during the first half of the morning session; the second

instructor organized various interactive activities to help students practice what they learned earlier in the morning.

Each weekday afternoon, every student was expected to have a one-hour informal meeting with their respective Chinese language partner, who was an undergraduate or graduate student enrolled in the host university. The language partners' responsibilities were not limited to providing help with their American counterparts' homework or practicing speaking Chinese. They were more like local friends who offer advice and tips to help their American partners navigate life outside the classroom in Shanghai. Thus, the informal meeting could take place wherever the pair decided. Each Chinese language partner was paid for one hour of meeting time per day. But the meeting could run longer than one hour depending on the activities and the relationship between the student and their language partner. Except for a few group excursions, students had weekday evenings and most weekends for themselves.

WeChat use in the program

The researcher taught a pre-departure course on the US campus to prepare students for this trip and was merely supervising their extracurricular activities during the program. At the orientation hosted by the host department, the local program coordinator who was also one instructor of the intermediate-level class created a WeChat group for all faculty including the researcher, American students, and the Chinese tutors involved in the summer study abroad program. The WeChat group was designed as an online community where program-related information such as class meeting time/location change and event updates could be shared timely and conveniently. Prior to the study abroad program, only one American student on the group had a WeChat account which she used sporadically to text her Chinese friends while on the US campus. None of the other students had used WeChat before. Thus, all students were taught during the orientation how to install the APP on their smartphones, create their own WeChat account, and practice various communicative features on WeChat.

WeChat is a very popular SNS used not only by people in China but also by various Chinese-speaking communities around the world. Different from Weibo, WeChat is widely used as a mobile application having two primary communicative features (see [Figure 1](#) for a screenshot of WeChat interface). First, it allows users to directly text and call each other or conduct a group chat via the 'Chats' feature. Second, it allows users to build an online community with friends by posting texts, photos, and video clips on their own 'Moments' (like the news feed on Facebook). Users can also access and comment on friends' posts on their respective 'Moments.' To enrich text-based communication, WeChat also supports the use of various Chinese memes as well as other multimedia such as emojis, photos, and video clips. In terms of format, Chinese memes are similar to those created by English-speaking users and usually contain images with captions.



Figure 1. Screenshot of WeChat interface.

However, each Chinese meme usually consists of a still or animated image that features a famous real or fictional Chinese figure with or without Chinese captions underneath the figure. These Chinese memes are particularly popular in group chat or a comment thread. For instance, a meme with Chinese president Xi Jinping clapping his hands is widely used among Chinese Internet users to mean 'bravo'. Besides the memes used and shared in all Chinese SNSs, there are also memes that are used exclusively in WeChat communication. These include animated cartoons or stickers, emojis, and unique images created by WeChat users such as a WeChat speaking bar which symbolizes a person speaking in WeChat and is used for a humorous purpose.

In addition to the regular communication features, WeChat also supports many other innovative functions such as online shopping, bank transactions, and arranging hospital appointments (The Economist, 2016). WeChat can quickly generate a unique QR code for each user. This lets users scan each other's QR code and quickly add each other as a WeChat contact. Consequently, WeChat boasts 1.1 billion registered accounts, 762 million active monthly users, and 639 million users accessing it on a smartphone (Chinese Internet Network

Information Center, 2016). It is not an exaggeration to deem WeChat as indispensable to daily life in China.

Participants and data collection

All seven students who were enrolled in the study abroad program were invited to participate in the research study. All of them were between 18 and 20 years old. Because affordances vary depending on each individual language learner, only two students from the study abroad program were the focus of this study. These two participants were purposely chosen because of their language proficiency level and distinct behaviors in WeChat communication. James only took one year of Mandarin Chinese language classes on the US campus prior to this trip and was in the intermediate-level class. Thus, his Chinese language proficiency was only at the beginning level. He was an 18-year-old Caucasian male who had never visited China before and had never used WeChat prior to this trip. Kathy, on the other hand, was a 20-year-old Latina and enrolled in the advanced-level class in the study abroad program. She had been taking Mandarin Chinese classes since high school and visited China on a school-organized two-week trip in high school. Since Kathy's Chinese language proficiency was already at the advanced level, she was provided with additional materials and homework different from those for other students in the advanced-level class. She had a WeChat account and had used it sporadically with her Chinese language partners before participating in this study abroad program.

Three qualitative data collection methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were adopted in this study. First, all participants were asked to fill out a weekly survey (see Appendix 1) to reflect on their weekly language learning experience. Since the survey was primarily used for the larger research project, only the data about each participant's WeChat use in the weekly surveys were compiled for data analysis in this study. Second, as a member of the WeChat group, the researcher conducted participatory observations by collecting screenshots of all participants' weekly WeChat activities such as the messages they shared in the WeChat public group and their postings on their respective 'moments'. In addition, participants who revealed that they exchanged private texts on WeChat were asked to submit screenshots of those additional texts as evidence of their WeChat communication. Third, two semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 2) were conducted with each participant: one in the middle of the study abroad program and one at the end of the study abroad program. Each interview was approximately half an hour long and conducted mostly in the lobby of the hotel where the participants stayed at a time convenient to each of them. Questions in the interview were designed to help the participants recollect what they'd gained through WeChat communication with native speakers of Chinese and how they perceived their WeChat interactions in terms of their language learning. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Data analysis

Following a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), two phases of data analysis were undertaken in this study. The first phase of data analysis was a theoretically informed and deductive process that aimed to identify examples (e.g. language use patterns from screenshots of their WeChat communication) of and references (e.g. how they feel about language learning through WeChat communication from weekly surveys and interview transcripts) to affordances for language learning in the data collected from both participants. As the focal analytical construct adopted in this study, affordances are defined as any discursive moves in WeChat communication that facilitate the participants' development as Mandarin Chinese users. After the examples and references were identified based on the definition, the researcher then categorized and coded them with distinct themes. Then a second coder was instructed how to identify the categories with a sample of the data. The second coder went through and coded all the WeChat communication data and interview transcripts based on the categories identified by the researcher. Upon comparing both coders' results, the interrater reliability was $\kappa = 0.893$ ($p < .001$). The two coders also discussed the discrepancies and resolved the disagreements. As a result of the coding, four affordances were identified. The second phase of the data analysis focused on uncovering how these affordances manifested themselves in each participant's WeChat communication throughout the study abroad program. The unique opportunities and challenges they each faced on WeChat were contextualized according to their WeChat communication behaviors and self-reflections to illustrate in detail how James and Kathy handled each of the affordances. To assist data analysis in this phase, the messages James and Kathy respectively contributed in the group chat each week throughout the program were tallied.

Findings

Affordance 1: a casual space with easy access to native speakers of Chinese

Since he created a WeChat account, James became an avid user of WeChat. Throughout the program, he found WeChat an extremely convenient and fun tool to stay in touch with the new Chinese friends he made in Shanghai. In the first interview, he shared his enthusiasm for using WeChat: 'I add new girls and other people since I came to China. I am constantly chatting non-stop Chinese. Using those memes and stickers are making things even more fun!' (interview with James on 7/6/2015). In the second interview, he was even more enthusiastic: 'Everyone is using WeChat here. It is easier than asking 'Hi, can I have your phone number?' I always chat with random people. Sometimes I don't understand everything they say, but I can guess' (interview with James on 8/4/2015). As shown in Table 1, James contributed to the group chat every week

Table 1. WeChat turns contributed by James and Kathy.

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7
James	11	4	4	3	3	4	16
Kathy	0	2	3	12	0	2	7

throughout the program. And he contributed at least one turn whenever a new topic started in the group. Although he was technically a beginning-level Chinese language learner, he managed to contribute either a Chinese sentence or a funny sticker to spice up the conversations in the group. [Figure 2](#) illustrates his engagement in one conversation with the group.

In this WeChat conversation, another American student in the study abroad program started to tease their Chinese language partners by joking that ‘你们都书呆子’ (you are all nerds). Then the Chinese counterparts defended themselves by posting either a Chinese meme or a message ‘书呆子还是学霸啊?’ (nerds or academic lords – Internet slang for ‘star students’). The American student followed up with ‘书呆子因为他念书’ (nerd because he reads). James followed with three messages in a row. The first one was a video clip showing their American peers were playing poker in their dorm. The second one was a Chinese sentence ‘我们去健身房’ (we go to the gym). The third one was a Chinese meme in which President Xi was showing off his chest muscles by tearing off his shirt. James apparently attempted to contribute to the conversation by illustrating that they (the American students) were not nerds because they played poker and worked out instead of locking themselves indoors to read books. The language bantering with their Chinese peers and the use of memes, video clip and stickers all made the conversation engaging and fun.

**Figure 2.** Screenshot of group chat 1.

As shown in Table 1, in contrast to James, Kathy was not so active in the group chat. In some weeks (e.g. Week 1, Week 5), she did not contribute any message to the group chat. Although she contributed 12 turns in Week 4, 8 out of 12 were photos she took for the group during a group outing. According to the WeChat communication data, Kathy used WeChat primarily to discuss with her Chinese language partner their daily meeting time and location. She explained in the second interview, ‘I have more complex conversations in person than on WeChat’ (interview with Kathy on 8/4/2015). However, similar to James, she recognized the casual nature and convenience of WeChat communication. In the second interview, she also shared, ‘WeChat is a big help to maintain connection with new friends. And yeah, it is fun to text friends there, with all the stickers and memes. I don’t text much but I enjoy reading those messages in our group chat’. (interview with Kathy on 8/4/2015)

The data show that James and Kathy took advantage of the affordance of casual conversation styles on WeChat to different degrees. James, a beginning-level Chinese language learner, became highly motivated to engage in the low-stress WeChat conversations which enabled him to practice using Chinese phrases and sentences he learned earlier. By contrast, although enjoying the fun communication styles, Kathy preferred more face-to-face conversations. But both of them recognized the convenience of using WeChat to build and maintain connection with native speakers of Chinese.

Affordance 2: authentic meaning-focused communication with native speakers of Chinese

Primarily used as a messaging tool, WeChat communication is dominated with authentic information sharing, which both James and Kathy took advantage of. James gushed about the authentic and diverse topics he could share with native speakers of Chinese on WeChat in the first interview:

It seems more real per se to use it to talk to other people other than teachers and students. Obviously there are some words and phrases that I don’t know, but it is definitely interesting to talk about a lot of different interesting topics that are not included in the textbook conversations. It is cool to see what other people do. (interview with James on 7/6/2015)

In the second interview, he praised the organic conversations he was having with Chinese friends on WeChat:

The materials we cover in textbooks are just based on our learning in classroom. It is homework. It is not interesting. It’s not much fun to type. But if I chat with a girl and say ‘hi, this weekend I’ll go to somewhere...’ so that’s more fun. It’s practice for sure to form a sentence, to type. It’s not homework anymore. (interview with James on 8/4/2015)

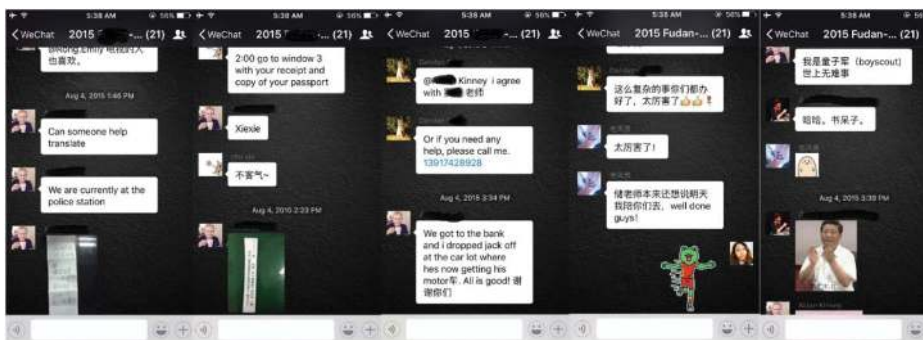


Figure 3. Screenshot of group chat 2.

This further illustrated James' engagement in WeChat communication. He not only joined the group chat, but actively sought help from the group. As shown in the conversation captured in Figure 3, one day James accompanied his American roommate to a Chinese police station to get back his scooter that was towed away by the local police earlier in the morning. With limited Chinese in such contexts, James sought help from the WeChat group. In this conversation, James first posted a photo of the notice he got from the police and asked Chinese friends in the group to translate. After following the instructions in the notice and getting to the police station, he asked the group to translate a new notice given to him by the police. Eventually he handled the interaction smoothly. Throughout the conversation, James used English, photos, pinyin, and Chinese sentences/phrases he knew to carry out the conversation. Although the majority of his utterances were in English due to his beginning-level Chinese language proficiency, he managed to use Chinese phrases and expressions he knew such as 'xiexie' (thanks), 'motor 车' (motorcycle), '谢谢你们' (thank you all) whenever he could. When the Chinese friends praised his competence of handling the task, he responded with a full Chinese sentence '我是童子军, 世上无难事' (I am a Boyscout. There is no impossible mission in the world). He even quoted a Chinese proverb '世上无难事' (There is no impossible mission in the world) which was a highly appropriate expression for the occasion.

WeChat communication shows Kathy used WeChat to maintain authentic meaning-focused communication with her Chinese friends as well. In the weekly survey reflections, she consistently reflected that 'I use WeChat to talk to my Chinese language partner to decide where and when to meet every day.' Figure 4 shows a conversation she had with her Chinese language partner. While they were planning their daily meeting, Kathy told her language partner that her stomach hurt. So her language partner offered to help. Eventually they decided to meet on the 12th floor at 2 pm that day. It is notable that Kathy consistently used Chinese language even when her language partner started the conversation in English to offer some help and ask about her symptoms. Although some of Kathy's sentences were grammatically awkward, her language partner did not



Figure 4. Screenshot of Kathy's private chat 1.

correct her. For instance, she said '我觉得中饭对我不舒服'(I feel lunch was uncomfortable to me) which is understandable but sounds very odd to native speakers of Chinese. Her language partner carried on the conversation without pointing out the mistake.

Affordance 2 seemed to work for both James and Kathy despite their language proficiency difference. Both of them reported they constantly chatted with Chinese friends on WeChat. Kathy was able to express herself rather easily in Chinese. Not deterred by his limited Chinese skills, James was excited by the diverse, interesting, and non-textbook conversations he could have with new Chinese friends on WeChat. He used English, photos, and pinyin along with Chinese expressions he knew to engage in various conversations. It was clear to everyone that conversations on WeChat were meant to share information and build connections rather than correcting anyone's language errors, which rendered WeChat communication an integral part of James and Kathy's daily lives in China.

Affordance 3: linguistic resources and multiliteracies

Although WeChat communication is meaning-focused, both James and Kathy reflected that they also benefited from valuable although different linguistic resources on WeChat due to their disparate Chinese language proficiency.

As a beginning-level Chinese language learner, James was surprised to find out he enjoyed typing Chinese very much as reflected in his first interview ‘I cannot believe how well I can type Chinese, I am able to write sentences in Chinese and fast... I have to ask people to translate some colloquial expressions though’ (interview with James on 7/6/2015). After one more month of study in Shanghai, James reflected in the second interview that his vocabulary was expanded because of the WeChat chat he had ‘I’ve learned different vocabulary and sentence structures... It’s casual, it’s more colloquial, help me to use Chinese. I am able to learn and use different types of words...’ (interview with James on 8/4/2015). This is illustrated in a WeChat conversation (see [Figure 5](#)) James had with his Chinese language partner in which James asked his Chinese language partner ‘Can you translate ‘suck it up bitches?’ Therefore, WeChat provided opportunities for James to not only practice writing Chinese, but also acquire new and colloquial vocabulary.

As stated earlier, Kathy did not participate in text-based WeChat conversations as extensively as James did. WeChat communication data show that she didn’t take advantage of the opportunity to conduct voice chat either. However,



Figure 5. Screenshot of James’s private chat.



Figure 6. Screenshot of Kathy's private chat 2.

she reflected in weekly surveys and interviews that the most exciting linguistic gains for her were Chinese slang terms, 'I learn Chinese urban slang by reading Chinese friends' 'Moments'. For example, if I see something I don't understand, I use translation. I sometimes ask my language partner to explain to me when I see her.' (Week 6 Survey Reflection)

In addition to exposure to new vocabulary, James and Kathy also demonstrated prolific multiliteracy skills in WeChat communication. As shown in [Figures 2 and 3](#), James continuously deployed video clips, memes, stickers, photos, English, Chinese and sometimes pinyin to help him communicate with other WeChat users. Kathy showed similar skills, but she used stickers and memes much less frequently. [Figure 6](#) is a screenshot of two adjacent WeChat conversations Kathy had with her Chinese language partner. In both conversations, she used WeChat stickers to show her emotions: the first was a sad rabbit following her good-bye greeting '好的, 明天见' (Ok, see you tomorrow) to show how sad she felt to say goodbye. In the second conversation, after her language partner suggested '现在我还在外面, 我回学校了直接去宾馆找你好吗? (I am still outside now. I will go directly to the hotel to look for you after I get back to campus, Okay?), Kathy responded with '好的' (Okay) followed with a cute smiling octopus to show her happiness to see her partner soon.

Although WeChat provided both James and Kathy opportunities for language learning, the linguistic affordances for them were different due to their linguistic disparity. Still a beginning-level Chinese language learner, James mainly benefited from the numerous opportunities to practice typing Chinese and to get instant help with new and colloquial expressions he needed in WeChat conversations. On the other hand, Kathy who was already a fluent Chinese language

speaker focused on Chinese urban slang which she would not have learned in textbooks. While both of them enjoyed the multiliteracies in WeChat communication, James took particular advantage of the multimodal resources afforded on WeChat such as video clips, memes, stickers, photos, even English and pinyin to complement his limited Chinese skills when maintaining communication with native speakers of Chinese.

Affordance 4: space for new identity creation

WeChat also affords a space for James to develop and show a new identity as a competent Chinese language user despite his actual proficiency. In the first interview, James gushed, 'I add new girls and people since I came to China. I cannot believe how well I am able to write sentences in China. I can type Chinese, and fast! I am constantly chatting nonstop Chinese' (interview with James on 7/4/2015). He was apparently surprised by this newly discovered Chinese typing skill. His newly discovered confidence might explain his ardent participation in the group chat. During one field trip to Shanghai's Oriental TV station, he was the only student who took liberty to record a video clip of himself speaking Chinese as a Chinese anchorman in the evening news studio (see [Figure 7](#)). He posted the video clip in the group chat and followed with a text '我是新闻播放人, 在晚上6-7点的时候请观看我的节目'(I am the anchorman. Please watch my show at 6-7 pm). As a beginning-level Chinese language learner, James' confidence in sharing his Chinese news broadcast recording and script with the group full of native speakers of Chinese shows his willingness to flaunt his new identity as a competent Chinese language user. He remained highly motivated to learn new vocabulary from his Chinese interlocutors. In the second interview, he explicated his real motive of learning and typing Chinese on WeChat, 'I am able to learn and use different types of words. I have to use all these words to help me have conversations to impress my new Chinese friends' (interview with James on 8/4/2015). This shows that James was able to resort to those multimodal semiotic resources and linguistic resources afforded on WeChat and forged a new identity as a fluent Chinese language user who can impress native speakers of Chinese. This new identity usually takes years to develop in face-to-face communication, especially in Mandarin Chinese, a category IV language for native English speakers (DLI, 2011). However, WeChat enabled James to forge it and maintain smooth online communication with his Chinese friends after merely one month in Shanghai.

Kathy took a different approach to using WeChat. Compared to James, she was much less active on WeChat, especially in group chat. She used WeChat to maintain communication with her Chinese friends, e.g. to arrange meeting time and location. However, her communication with her Chinese language partner on WeChat spiked upon her departure from Shanghai. For instance, Kathy



Figure 7. Screenshot of group chat 3.

knew from an earlier WeChat conversation that her language partner would start the autumn semester on September 8. As shown in [Figure 8](#), on September 7 when she was already back in the US, she sent a very thoughtful new-semester greeting message ‘XX你好, 由于明天是你的第一天上课, 我祝你好运。我觉得你又聪明又认真, 你会没有问题学习好。’(hello, tomorrow is your first day of class. I wish you good luck. I think you are smart and diligent. You will have no problem getting good grades.) This illustrates that Kathy as an advanced-level Chinese language learner was already a competent Chinese language user who knows how to express herself and when to send culturally appropriate greeting messages. It corroborates Kathy’s reflection that ‘When talking to my language partner and friends, I have more complex conversations in person. I feel quite comfortable speaking Chinese around Chinese people’ (interview with Kathy on 8/4/2015). In other words, while using WeChat to maintain basic daily communication with her Chinese friends, she didn’t feel the need to show her

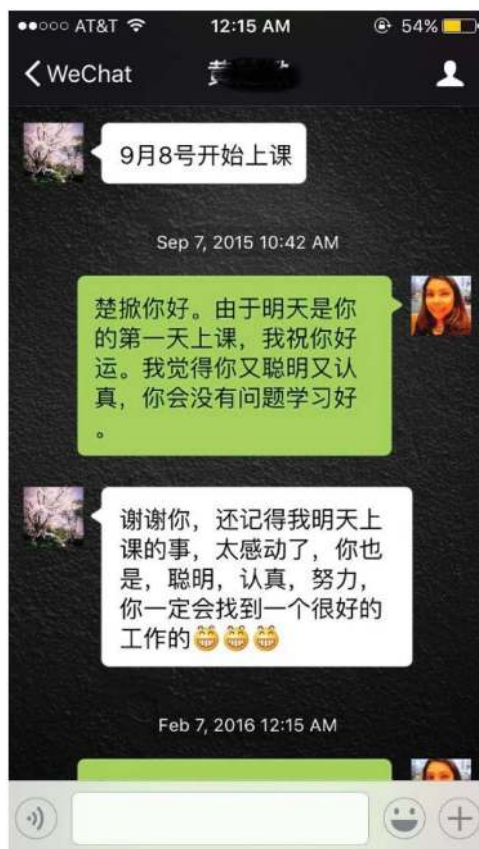


Figure 8. Screenshot of Kathy's private chat 3.

Chinese language competence on WeChat until WeChat became the only communication tool she could use with her friends.

In all, it seems WeChat afforded James an opportunity to quickly forge and enjoy a new identity as a competent Chinese language user rather than merely a beginning-level learner. However, Kathy as an advanced-level Chinese language learner preferred to build and show her identity as a competent Chinese language user in face-to-face communication.

Discussion

As opposed to the SNSs reported in previous studies, WeChat is primarily a messaging tool that supports somewhat different communication norms. This, compounded with the participants' Chinese language proficiency and personal preference in online communication, explains the distinct affordances WeChat provided to James and Kathy during their seven-week study abroad trip. First, WeChat did provide both participants certain affordances that are similar to those in previous studies. Like MMOGs and Facebook-based learning

communities (e.g. McBride, 2009; Mills, 2011; Rama et al., 2012), WeChat afforded a fun and causal space for both James and Kathy to have instant and direct communication with native speakers of Chinese. This in particular excited James who was bored with classroom-based, homework-laden learning. Drawn by these communication features, James became a rather ardent contributor in the group chat. Like any SNSs, the conversations carried out in WeChat were naturally meaning-focused rather than form-focused. In other words, no one was monitoring and grading the quality of language use. Despite his limited Chinese language proficiency, James was highly motivated to build connections with and seek help with real-life problems from Chinese friends on WeChat. Kathy, possessing much higher language proficiency, took advantage of WeChat's convenience to complete various real-life tasks such as scheduling daily meetings with her language partner. These affordances could help James and Kathy develop further communicative competence needed in real-life conversations as confident users of Mandarin Chinese (Rama et al., 2012).

Stemming from the casual and meaning-focused communication afforded in WeChat communication, WeChat also afforded James and Kathy linguistic resources and opportunities for multiliteracy development. However, James and Kathy reported different benefits of accessing WeChat's linguistic resources. James with only beginning-level proficiency benefited greatly from ample typing practices and new vocabulary he was exposed to when chatting with Chinese friends. This finding corroborates those in previous studies that SNS-based communication helped learners develop communicative competence (e.g. Blattner & Fiori, 2009, 2011; Chen, 2013; McBride, 2009; Mills, 2011; Rama et al., 2012). By contrast, Kathy reported that she learned a great number of slang terms by reading her Chinese friends' WeChat posts particularly in 'Moments.' This finding contradicts those in Diao's study (2014) in which the researcher discovered the two participants had little engagement with Weibo and thus developed limited Internet linguistic awareness. This contradiction may be explained by two reasons. First, thanks to its instant messaging service, WeChat is a much more popular SNS than Weibo. The fact that all Kathy's professors and peers, including her Chinese partner and American peers were on WeChat made WeChat communication even more relevant and engaging. Second, Kathy was already fluent in daily Chinese communication. As part of the naturalistic language learning process, she began to pay attention to those areas she still felt deficient in, Chinese urban slang. Various posts shared in her Chinese peers' 'Moments' provided a rich repertoire of urban slang which are particularly popular among Chinese college students.

The opportunity of multiliteracy development and usage was consistent with those discovered in previous studies on SNSs (e.g. Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Chen, 2013; Klimanova & Dembovskaia, 2013; Schreiber, 2015). This was especially important for James. The multimodal linguistic and semiotic resources available in WeChat allowed him to participate as a full-fledged member in WeChat communication despite his lower Chinese language proficiency.

A few previous studies (e.g. Black, 2008, 2009; Chen, 2013; Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2013; McBride, 2009; Mills, 2011; Rinehardt & Zander, 2011; Schreiber, 2015) discover that participation in SNSs allows learners to develop multiple identities that were not previously accessible to them, e.g. users of L2. James's experience affirmed this affordance in WeChat communication. James did not realize he could type Chinese fast until he started using WeChat to communicate with new Chinese friends. He enjoyed chatting with new Chinese friends on WeChat and took every opportunity to impress them with his Chinese. This is extremely rare in face-to-face communication for a beginning-level Chinese language learner. In other words, text-based WeChat communication afforded James an opportunity to be freed from his identity as a beginning-level Chinese language learner and create a somewhat augmented identity as a fluent user of Chinese. Although this augmented identity is different from what Chen (2013) and Schreiber (2015) discovered among advanced-level multilingual learners, it is still a positive transition for James who was able to assume a new role as a more engaged user of Chinese. These findings have significant pedagogical implications. As a ubiquitous communication tool in Chinese-speaking communities, WeChat can be integrated in Chinese language education in both domestic and study abroad contexts to connect language learners at various levels of proficiency with native speakers of Chinese. For lower-level Chinese language learners, they can be encouraged to take advantage of the multimodal linguistic and semiotic resources available on WeChat, such as Chinese characters, pinyin, memes, and emojis to communicate on fun topics with Chinese friends. The focus should be on learners' engagement in various authentic text-based conversations, eventually developing their identity as fluent users of Chinese. Higher-level learners can be encouraged to venture out of text-based conversations to conduct audio or video-based chat on WeChat. They can also take advantage of the ample linguistic resources available in their friends' 'Moments' and articles circulated on WeChat by different friends, further developing their verbal communication and reading skills as well as identity as competent users of Chinese. WeChat communication should be more relevant in China-based study abroad programs since WeChat has more deeply penetrated Chinese people's social and professional lives. As sojourners in China, study abroad students should take WeChat communication as not only an effective linguistic development context but also a social necessity.

The study also contributes to the SLA literature on using affordance as a theoretical construct, given the paucity of research in this area. Most of the existing studies (e.g. Darhower, 2008; Hoven & Palalas, 2011; Miller, 2005; Thoms, 2014; Thoms & Poole, 2017) that adopt affordance as a theoretical construct focus on affordances in either online or classroom-based formal L2 learning environment. This study investigated affordances in a SNS-based informal L2 learning environment and revealed the learner-contingent nature of affordance in authentic WeChat communication. Future studies can be conducted to further explore the dynamic nature of affordances in SNSs and expand the use of affordance as a theoretical construct in SLA.

Conclusion

Adopting an ecological and sociocultural theoretical perspective, this study investigated the affordances accessible to two American college-level Mandarin Chinese learners in WeChat communication during a summer study abroad program in Shanghai. The findings show that compared to other SNSs, WeChat provided distinct affordances to the two Mandarin Chinese learners at different proficiency levels. WeChat as a revolutionary SNS has tremendously changed many aspects of social communication in mainland China and Chinese-speaking communities around the world. Exploratory case studies such as this one shed light on the advantages as well as complexity of WeChat-based communication for learners of Chinese as a second language. It is hoped that the findings of this study can equip students, educators and administrators engaged in CSL education with a better understanding of WeChat-based communication in order to better take advantage of the affordances and design effective WeChat-based Chinese language learning activities.

This study only focused on two participants' WeChat communication during a 7-week study abroad program. The number and language proficiency of participants as well as the length of the participants' sojourn in China could limit the insights that can apply to a larger population. Since WeChat is becoming ubiquitous in Chinese-speaking communities, more research studies should be conducted to investigate with both qualitative and quantitative methodology the process and outcomes of WeChat-based communication for learners of Mandarin Chinese at various proficiency levels. This study only focused on WeChat use in a language-focused study abroad context. More research can also be conducted to investigate the potential of integrating WeChat communication in a foreign language context.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Lijin is an associate professor in the Department of Modern Languages at DePaul University, Chicago, IL. She obtained her PhD degree in Second Language Acquisition/Instructional Technology in 2007 at University of South Florida. Her research interests include sociocultural theory, technology-enhanced foreign language teaching and learning, language socialization, and study abroad.

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Appendices**APPENDIX 1. 2015 study abroad weekly reflection**

Your name: _____ Week #: _____

Part I: Interaction with Chinese acquaintances:

1. How much time did you spend speaking Chinese with your Chinese professor and TA during the non-class time?

- <1 h per day 1–2 h per day
 >2 h per day other, please specify: _____

2. Besides your Chinese professor, TA, and tutor, did you talk to other Chinese acquaintance/friend(s)? If yes, who were they?

3. During your tutoring session, how much time did you speak Chinese with your Chinese tutor?

- 75%–100% time 50%–75% time
 25%–50% time <25% time (rarely)

4. Where did you meet with your tutor this week? (check all that apply)

- on campus off campus, please specify _____

5. What did you talk about when you met with your tutor this week? (check all that apply)

- homework non-homework topic(s) my tutor prepared
 non-homework topics I am interested in

6. Please summarize what you learned in terms of Chinese language and culture from your conversations with your Chinese acquaintances outside of classroom this week?

Part II: Interaction with Chinese strangers:

7. In this past one week, how much time outside of your classroom did you spend interacting with native Chinese people you didn't personally know of?

- <1 h per day 1–2 h per day
 >2 h per day other, please specify: _____

8. When you talked to a native Chinese stranger, how often did you use Chinese this week?

- whenever I spoke to a native speaker in most situations
 only occasionally not at all

9. Who were the native speakers of Chinese you interacted with this week? (check all that apply)

- service people (e.g. street vendors, waitress)
 Fudan students/faculty/staff
 pedestrians on the streets
 others, please specify _____

10. What did you learn in terms of Chinese language and culture from your interactions with the native Chinese this week?

Part III: Social media use

11. How often did you use WeChat this past one week?

- 1~2 times a week daily
 3~5 times a day

12. What did you use WeChat for this past one week (check all that apply)?

- exchange messages (text, audio, photos, video) with acquaintances in China
 post photos on your moments
 read acquaintances' moments
 other, please specify: _____

13. How often do you type Chinese in WeChat?

- never
 whenever I feel in the mood or confident in expressing myself in Chinese
 when I have extra help, i.e. my language partner, TA, or another Chinese friend
 I type Chinese every time I post

14. How helpful do you think WeChat is for your Chinese language and culture learning?

- 1 (not at all) 2 3 4 5 (extremely helpful)

Part IV: Summary

15. What was the most enjoyable experience outside of class you had this week, including your WeChat communication? What was the most challenging experience outside of class you had this week, including your WeChat communication?

APPENDIX 2. Semi-structured interview sample questions

1. How did you use WeChat to communicate with people since you came to China? Who are your friends on WeChat?
2. How do you view the impact of your WeChat communication on your life in China so far?
3. How do you view your WeChat communication in terms of helping your Chinese language and culture learning?