

Foreign language teachers living and learning in affinity spaces

Vida y Aprendizaje de los Docentes de Idiomas Extranjeros en Espacios Afines

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Abstract

This qualitative case study delves into the dynamics of three English language teachers living and learning within affinity spaces (AS). To capture comprehensive insights, the research used in-depth interviews and video recorded observations of interactions in AS. The analysis was conducted using Nvivo software for coding and categorizing the collected information. The findings of this study unveil the participants' active involvement in various AS, with social networks and video games emerging as the most prevalent ones. While individual passions played a role in shaping the content shared, the teachers' professional interests also significantly influenced the nature of their contributions. Within these affinity spaces, teachers engaged using new literacies, which enabled them to foster social interactions on topics of personal or professional interest, facilitating communication and collaboration, and even assuming different roles. In conclusion, the findings highlight a consistent and enthusiastic engagement of teachers within AS, emphasizing the potential these spaces hold for the evolving nature of education in the

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digital age, where personal interests, professional growth, and language acquisition converge within dynamic digital communities. As educators and learners continue to navigate this landscape, the outcomes offer a valuable roadmap for harnessing the power of AS to foster meaningful learning experiences, authentic communication, and innovative teaching practices among English language teachers.

Keywords

Literacy; New Literacies; affinity spaces.

Resumen

Este estudio de caso cualitativo exploró la dinámica de participación en espacios afines (EA) de tres profesores de inglés para vivir y aprender. Para obtener una visión completa, la investigación empleó entrevistas a profundidad y observaciones video grabadas de interacciones en estos espacios. Los datos recopilados se analizaron utilizando el software Nvivo, codificando y categorizando la información. Los hallazgos de este estudio revelan la participación activa de los participantes en varios espacios afines, siendo las redes sociales y los videojuegos los más predominantes, donde las pasiones individuales, así como los intereses profesionales de los profesores influyeron significativamente en la naturaleza de sus contribuciones. Dentro de estos espacios afines, los profesores se involucraron usando nuevas literacidades, las cuales les permitieron fomentar interacciones sociales sobre temas de interés personal o profesional, facilitando la comunicación y la colaboración, e incluso asumiendo diferentes roles. En conclusión, los hallazgos resaltan un compromiso constante y entusiasta de los profesores dentro de los EA, enfatizando el potencial que estos tienen para la naturaleza en evolución de la educación en la era digital, donde los intereses personales, el crecimiento profesional y la adquisición de idiomas convergen dentro de comunidades digitales dinámicas. A medida que los educadores y los estudiantes continúan navegando en este panorama, los resultados ofrecen un valioso mapa para aprovechar el poder de los EA para fomentar experiencias de aprendizaje significativas, la comunicación auténtica y las prácticas innovadoras de enseñanza entre los profesores de inglés.

Palabras clave

Literacidad; Nuevas Literacidades; espacios afines.

Introduction

Social practices such as blogging, video gaming, online social networking, creating music lists, editing music videos, sharing and designing memes, participating in interest-driven online forums or platforms and making Tik Toks are new literacies, which differ from conventional literacies along two dimensions: technical/technological and in terms of a distinct “ethos” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, Ch. 3). These are characterized as more participatory, collaborative, and distributed, and less “published,” less “author-centric,” and less “individual” than conventional literacies (Knobel and Lankshear, 2014, p. 98). Notably, these new literacies have become prevalent not only in the lives of students but also among teachers.

More importantly, these new literacies have opened opportunities for teachers to affiliate in Affinity Spaces (AS). These are special interests’ groups that offer learning that can either support personal or professional development, and where people ‘bond’ first and foremost to an endeavor or interest; secondarily, if at all, to teach others” (Gee, 2005, p. 219). In other words, in AS interest drives participation rather than relationship building, and people congregate to share common values, beliefs, interests, and their participation gets maximized since they are motivated to do it. Moreover, the main purpose is to develop the necessary skills to solve problems relevant to the group (Gee, 2017, p.9), and engage in AS with a collective endeavor, working as a community to achieve common objectives or goals.

Nevertheless, teachers’ participation in AS is not a recent development or due to the Covid-19 health crisis when people had to resort to digital literacy practices, and some teachers have already been part of affinity learning sites, where they can readily share web resources and engage in self-directed professional learning and networking (Prestridge, 2019; Trust et al., 2016). Moreover, there is enough evidence that teachers have been actively living and learning within AS on platforms such as Facebook (FB), Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, Hangouts, and more, embracing the opportunities to create ‘new avenues for sharing and accessing people anywhere’ (Van Allen & Forsythe, 2019, p. 13).

Previous studies have extensively explored the influence of AS on teachers' professional practices. For instance, Carpenter et al. (2020) have stated that teachers' motivation for using platforms like Pinterest is often linked to their desire to engage in academic communities and enhance their teaching practices. This AS serves as more than just a space to share and acquire teaching strategies or ideas; it also offers economic incentives, as teachers receive retributions for the content, materials, or ideas they contribute to this virtual environment. Similarly, Friesen & Lowe (2011) assert that AS like Facebook and Twitter provide ideal conditions for teachers to exchange ideas, materials, and suggestions, leading to continuous improvement in their teaching practices. Additionally, participating in academic communities has given teachers the opportunity to develop diverse teaching roles through constant interaction (Kell & Kell, 2013).

Also, Carpenter et al. (2020) conducted a survey study with a sample of 841 teachers to identify their reasons for using Instagram and how they utilize the platform for personal and professional matters. The study's findings revealed that educators leverage virtual platforms like Instagram not only for personal communication and entertainment but also to access academic knowledge and enhance their teaching methods. More than half of the participants reported building educator communities and support networks and collaborating with other educators as significant motivations for using Instagram. These findings shed light on the multifaceted use of Instagram by educators, demonstrating its growing relevance as a tool for professional development.

In this context, AS seem to influence teachers' interactions within virtual environments. Beyond facilitating the exchange of ideas, these spaces foster the emergence of online communities that offer valuable professional experiences where teachers engage in self-directed learning, often through active participation in professional development websites (Beach, 2017, p. 63). Moreover, these web-based learning environments serve as primary sources of information from diverse fields, providing accessible opportunities for learning and enriching teachers' repertoire of professional knowledge and instructional materials (Demir, 2018; Stošić & Stošić, 2014; Wu & Chen, 2020), supporting their continuous professional growth. Notably, teachers actively engaged in AS commonly experience the transformative influence of these spaces, acquiring new learning and insights.

Although, the impact of AS on teachers' lives extends beyond the use of technology in the classroom. Curwood et al. (2013) propose that theorists who es-

pouse theories of social learning and discourse might posit that “the ways in which technology seeps into literacy practices would depend heavily on the specific communities and the ways in which the new tools are or are not taken up” (p.48). Therefore, it is essential to consider that contexts and situations evolve, and, as Gee (2018, p. 8) emphasizes, “powerful teaching and learning take place not only inside classrooms”, but also in diverse informal physical and virtual spaces where people interact, exchange ideas, communicate, and create their own spaces based on shared preferences in affinity spaces or groups.

Undoubtedly, today there is a concern about AS since these “make available a range of opportunities to create, participate and learn” (Magnifico et al, 2018, p. 145). As educators are problem solvers, these spaces unlock potential opportunities for better learning and teaching and allow teachers to be learners again and use AS to join a “common endeavor” (Gee, 2004; Lammers et al., 2012) that can be related to their personal or professional needs. In this regard, teachers who are members of AS can become part of a global community that shares struggles, fears, and joys, but also need to be supported and learn to support others.

Thus , this qualitative case study aims to provide empirical evidence regarding the living and learning of three English language teachers in AS, describing how their participation in digital spaces allow them to participate in online portals, have common endeavors, collaborate, communicate, and do role shifting, revealing valuable insights into the ways these teachers enhance their English language proficiency and teaching.

In the following lines, the theoretical underpinnings that support this study are presented as well as the methodology, results, discussion, and conclusions of the study.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on several theoretical concepts to elucidate the phenomenon of living and learning in an AS. Of particular importance are the notions of literacy and new literacies, which have become instrumental in facilitating participation, communication, and collaboration while networking. Furthermore, the concept of affinity spaces is related to learning since these spaces have become an opportunity for teachers of other languages like English to enhance their language proficiency and teaching practice.

Literacy and New Literacies

One of the first concepts that this study needs to highlight is the definition of literacy, which has changed due to the different new literacy practices that today people engage in while blogging, chatting, texting to interact in social and academic networks, or video gaming. These demand a form of literacy that goes beyond the conventional understanding of literacy as reading and writing exclusively within the school context.

Street (2001, as cited in Perry, 2012, p. 54) provides an insightful definition, describing literacy as a social set of practices that are intricately linked to cultural settings and specific contexts. Similarly, Freire (1970, p. 206) describes literacy as a series of social skills that individuals develop to analyze their roles within social groups. According to these perspectives, literacy is not merely an individual practice isolated from the social sphere, but rather a social phenomenon that operates based on collective principles, identity, beliefs, and knowledge. This implies, as Street (1984, as cited in Gee, 2015) suggests, that literacy varies across different societies, resulting in several literacies and diverse literacy practices specific to various social contexts.

In this regard, Barton & Hamilton (2012, p. 6) assert “literacy practices have been evolving” over the years in tandem with societal changes. Hence, literacy is directly linked to the uses and purposes of reading and writing within individuals’ social contexts (Barton et al., 2000, p. 7). Indeed, a broader perspective has been adopted by UNESCO (Montoya, 2018, p. 2), that conceives literacy as “a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich, and fast-changing world”. In other words, today’s definition of literacy differs significantly from that held in the past, as being literate now entails not only interpreting texts but also designing them to participate actively in an online, internet-based society.

Furthermore, as outlined by Kern (2000, p. 95), literacy encompasses both the interpretation and creation of meaning from various texts presented through different modes and media. This definition aligns with Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory, emphasizing that learning is not solely determined by internal cognitive processes but also requires external factors, such as social interaction, which inherently involves cultural elements, to foster meaningful learning outcomes.

Certainly, definitions of literacy may not always be the same, but they can complement one another to form a more comprehensive understanding. Various international

organizations such as The European Literacy Policy Network, The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and The World Bank agree that the definition of literacy is closely linked to a group of cognitive skills that have to do with the process of enabling people to process, understand and produce output through oral and written means, to interact and socialize within social groups (Montoya, 2018, p. 4).

In this regard, this study not only acknowledges literacy as a cognitive process but also asserts that it is a social practice, interwoven into larger social practices, developed through apprenticeship, and shaped by users to conform with social needs (Kern, 2000, p. 38).

In today's world, more than ever before, individuals, including educators, are cultivating a multifaceted literacy that extends beyond the boundaries of traditional schooling. This literacy is used to engage with others who may be physically distant but digitally connected. Through oral and written interactions, individuals share viewpoints, communicate, and collaboratively construct meaning across different contexts. They employ different media and modes to design texts with diverse purposes and interpretations. Within the field of education, both students and teachers are developing a kind of literacy that demands searching for opportunities to expand their knowledge and grow professionally outside of the classroom, making use of the new literacies available on the internet.

From a sociocultural perspective and guided by Lankshear and Knobel (2007), it can be said that being literate is not only about being able to be proficient in a language, but it has to do with applying knowledge in social cultures to exchange information, to create meaning (p.4). In other words, a person is not only literate when being able to master some skills in the target language, but it also involves the metacognitive process that takes place when implementing those skills to make and transform meaning. Similarly, Lankshear and Knoble (2006) establish a difference between the previous definitions of literacy and the current one:

Reading and writing are not the same things in a youth zine (pronounced 'zeen') culture, an online chat space, a school classroom, a feminist reading group, or in different kinds of religious ceremonies. People read and write differently out of different social practices, and these different ways with words are part of different ways of being persons and different ways and facets of doing life. (p. 13)

Thus, the concept of new literacies as social practices is intricately linked to the integration of literacy within technological and virtual spaces. The rise of new technological tools has transformed various aspects of society, including economy, education, and entertainment, facilitating global communication. The accessibility to new information and knowledge has empowered individuals to engage in virtual affinity groups and communities, fostering interaction and participation in virtual settings.

Likewise, Lankshear and Knobel (2007) assert: "...if a literacy does not have what we call new ethos stuff we do not regard it as a new literacy, even if it has new technical stuff" (p. 7). As it is, the concept of new literacies as understood by Knobel and Lankshear suggests that these are social practices that hold technological stuff and ethos stuff (2014, p. 98), which allow people to participate, collaborate, communicate, and also support professional growth, as teachers become self-directed learners.

In other words, the fact that literacies take place in virtual scenarios does not mean they are 'new' since it is necessary to set those literacies in social scenarios where human interaction enables negotiation, as it always has, to construct new knowledge or new learning. In the same line of ideas, Cope and Kalantzis (2009, p. 168) express that knowledge as such is a product of learning since it is an ongoing process of meaning creation through social interaction within 'real world texts' in contemporary society and communities.

On the other hand, teachers have traditionally worked in isolation when planning lessons or learning for professional development. Little motivation has also existed to reflect on their practice, share successful practices, or connect and learn from/with peers from the same profession (Gupta, 2014, p. 36). However, AS as virtual environments have become spaces where people with common ideals, interests, cultures, and so forth, congregate to carry out social interaction practices (Abrams & Lambers, 2017; Carpenter et al., 2020; Shafirova et al. 2020), hold reciprocal exchanges of information in diverse forms, and convey knowledge for meaning creation.

Therefore, it could be said that new literacies are above social practices that inform about the forms of learning and literacy taking place among people and delves into Gee's (2004) concept of AS, in physical or virtual locations where people come together around an interest or affinity to engage with others and with texts in multiple modes.

Affinity Spaces and New Learning

The concept of affinity spaces (AS), initially introduced by Gee (2004), refers to places where individuals are drawn together by a shared practice or passion. These spaces “emphasize interaction among people rather than merely focusing on community membership” (Gee, 2013, p. 214). Moreover, AS enable individuals to gather in either virtual or physical environments, transcending barriers related to gender, race, country, or language (Gee, 2005, p. 220).

However, AS differ from the communities of practice proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991), where skilled practitioners guide and train their apprentices until they can perform independently. In contrast, AS serve as learning groups that prioritize participants’ commitment and dedication to pursuing their own interests without strict membership requirements (Gee, 2004). In other words, participation is open to all, and individuals can freely engage and disengage at will (Halaczkiwicz, 2020).

The truth is that for many years, people have actively participated in AS, driven by shared passions (Gee, 2004). Such participation “offers access to authentic audiences that read, respond to, and even critique written work” (Curwood et al., 2013, p. 677). Nowadays, engaging in new literacies within social media platforms, such as updating a status on Facebook, sharing fanfic stories, or texting on Twitter and WhatsApp, reflects this common interest or endeavor. Notably, there is a strong motivation to share with an authentic audience, which educators should recognize as valuable, considering its potential contribution to academic achievement (Buck, 2012, p. 15).

In addition, Magnifico et al. (2018) highlights that: “although Gee’s work on AS has perhaps been more associated with video gaming and fan cultures, there are AS, which do not belong to schools, and allow to share ideas with other members of affinity communities. These spaces, as suggested by Curwood et al. (2013, p. 683), “extend the boundaries of the classroom, motivating students to engage with reading, writing, and designing in novel and complex ways”.

Affinity spaces have also been harnessed as collaborative virtual environments, where individuals gather to share information, materials, and ideas on diverse topics. Carpenter et al. (2020, p. 2) describe AS like Pinterest as examples of teacherpreneurship, where educators actively participate, not only exchanging informa-

tion but also opting for financial rewards when others access their content. Similarly, Harvey and Hyndman (2018, p. 397) suggest that teachers have embraced social media to “fulfill their needs related to professional identity, community, and affective support”. For instance, Twitter has been instrumental in establishing academic and learning communities where participants share ideas regarding their professional practices (Tang & Hew., 2017, p. 98). Such online spaces provide opportunities for social interaction comparable to physical spaces.

Given Colombia’s 34.73 million Internet users (Kemp, 2020), it is highly probable that teachers of other languages are producing multimodal transformative works to showcase their participation and communication with like-minded individuals. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that these spaces extend beyond casual interactions with friends and acquaintances; they also serve as valuable platforms for learning. Additionally, these teachers are likely engaging in effective online learning, yet adhering to Moore’s (1997, p. 25) perspective, this demands a high degree of self-motivation, self-discipline, and self-direction, relying on autonomous and directive-free learning.

Regardless of the learning context, whether face-to-face (F2F) or online, personal, or academic, learning does not occur in isolation. Vygotsky (1978) highlights the inherently social nature of human learning, wherein cognitive understanding and knowledge construction depend on interactions with others. In this view, modern teachers have embraced peer networking (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009), demonstrating the positive effects of connecting, collaborating, and sharing content (Li & Greenhow, 2015) to foster social presence and establish academic or personal relationships.

Although , the gap in the previous literature is the lack of in-depth exploration of how teachers of other languages, particularly English, engage in AS to enhance their proficiency in the language and their teaching practice. While the existing literature acknowledges the existence and potential benefits of AS for students and educators alike, there is a need for more empirical studies that delve into the specific population this study addresses. By filling this gap, we can provide valuable insights for educators and educational institutions seeking to leverage AS for professional growth and foster a culture of continuous learning among teachers.

The connection between the previous paragraphs and the discussion on AS lies in the exploration of the components that define AS. According to Gee (2007, p.

94), these spaces are composed of two fundamental components: “Portals and a common endeavor”. Portals serve as gateways allowing access to the affinity space, and common portals include platforms like You Tube channels, social networks, video games, discussion boards and fanfiction websites, among others. The second component, the common endeavor, refers to the passion that captivates participants, encompassing shared interests and favorite practices. These endeavors include popular literature, movies, shows, video games, or hobbies to name a few (Halaczkiwicz, 2020). By discussing the components of AS, the research aims to highlight the relevance of Gee’s framework in understanding how the specific environment of AS operate, and how these components facilitate the living and learning experiences of teachers within these settings.

Also, considering these components, language educators can design and facilitate language learning experiences that leverage the power of AS to support language acquisition and proficiency development. In other words, embracing AS in language education may create dynamic learning environments where learners are immersed in meaningful language use to communicate, collaborate with peers who share their interests, and experience language learning as a personally relevant and engaging process. Furthermore, exploring the potential of AS for English language teaching aligns with the contemporary understanding of new literacies and the evolving nature of language learning in the digital age.

It is important to emphasize that AS include features as outlined by Gee (2013, p. 174), and these are particularly advantageous to be understood by users of AS in case these want to be introduced in the language classroom:

Table 1. Affinity Spaces Features

Number	Affinity spaces’ features
1	People in AS congregate due to a common endeavor based on shared values, ideals, interests, etc.
2	Participants in AS are not limited by a range of age
3	Members’ levels of expertise vary from newbies to masters in the endeavor space.
4	Participants in AS can produce and not just only consume since content varies according to their interaction in these online environments.
5	Content is transformed by participants’ interaction since most of it is not only produced by experts, companies, or designers but is also designed by participants of any level of expertise

Number	Affinity spaces' features
6	Affinity spaces aim to encourage participants in producing and sharing knowledge. For example, comments about tutorials, stories on Instagram, or TikTok about DIY (do it yourself) videos, and so forth.
7	Participants can contribute to producing the amount of content they desire according to their own interest.
8	Participants' contributions are valued in affinity spaces since they increase diversity regarding content.
9	AS honors participants' built-up knowledge due to the role participants adopt as leaders or designers of their own content.
10	Participation in AS varies according to participants' purpose in the virtual environment.
11	Participants can adopt several roles when interacting in AS according to their personal strengths and abilities.
12	Affinity spaces enable and encourage participants to adopt the role of leaders since they do not have "bosses". In other words, participants become leaders when interacting, and leaders participate as members.
13	AS promotes diversity among participants, even though they have distinct cultures.
14	Participants in AS are expected to produce both individual and collective learning.
15	There is no delimitation between work and play in AS since all the content and interactions are done towards a common endeavour or interest.

Source: Gee (2013).

In considering the features of AS, as presented in Table 1, it becomes evident how these offer a promising avenue for second language learning (Halaczkiwicz, 2020), and previous research has shown their positive impact on reading (Steinkuehler et al., 2010), and writing improvement for both native and non-native speakers (Black, 2007). The interactive nature of AS, where language learners can spontaneously congregate and participate, provides many opportunities for meaningful language use and authentic communication in English. Moreover, the online nature of these spaces, such as video games, social networks, fandoms, and academic platforms, enables language learners to engage in diverse and authentic language contexts, transcending physical barriers related to geography or culture (Gee, 2005).

Accordingly, participation in AS goes beyond casual interactions with friends and acquaintances; it involves joining a global community that shares common interests and endeavors (Gee, 2004). For English language learners, this sense of community provides valuable opportunities to practice and improve their language skills, with access to authentic audiences that read, respond to, and even critique their written work. Engaging in new literacies within these spaces, such as updating a status on Facebook, sharing fanfic stories, or texting on Twitter and WhatsApp, reflects the use of English in contemporary digital communication.

Overall, embracing AS in language education holds immense potential for facilitating language proficiency development, and creating dynamic learning environments where teachers and learners can thrive in meaningful language use and collaborative engagement. This study explicitly focuses on internet-based affinity spaces, given the plethora of opportunities these offer for creating, participating, and learning” (Magnifico et al., 2018, p. 145). We also argue that these spaces serve as valuable tools to unlock potential opportunities for better learning and teaching of other languages and enable teachers to become learners again and participate in a shared “common endeavor” that aligns with their personal or professional needs (Gee, 2004). Thus, being a member of AS presents an opportunity to join a global community where teachers of English can share their struggles, fears, and joys while also providing and receiving support. Despite the challenges that the use of another language might offer, teachers of English might have increasingly embraced these spaces, but more empirical evidence is needed to understand how this engagement is occurring in specific contexts.

Methodology

Research question

This study aimed at answering the following research question: how do teachers of English live and learn within affinity spaces?

Context and participants

The selection of David, Emily, and Caroline as participants for this study was guided by the aim of gaining a comprehensive understanding of English language teachers’ living and learning experiences in AS. Two of them are teachers of English in the undergraduate programs in a public university in the Caribbean coast in Colombia, while one teaches English in a private bilingual school. The three participants were carefully selected based on specific criteria that made them suitable representatives for exploring teachers’ engagement in these digital environments.

Firstly, the participants were all English language teachers, which aligned with the research focus on exploring the experiences of educators of this language. The decision to choose teachers who graduated from the same university was deliberate. This criterion assumed that teachers from the same institution may share common experiences, professional networks, and approaches to language teach-

ing, and this could shed light on how the shared institutional affiliation may shape their engagement and experiences in affinity spaces.

Secondly, the participants all held a master's degree in teaching foreign languages, indicating their advanced knowledge and expertise in language education. Also, they were known for their frequent interactions on the internet for personal and professional purposes. Their experience in utilizing online platforms for various purposes suggested a level of comfort and familiarity with digital environments, which could have significant implications for their engagement and adaptation to AS.

By considering these participant selection criteria, the research aimed to capture a diverse and rich range of experiences and perspectives of teachers engaging in AS. The chosen participants provided a unique lens into the ways in which language educators navigate these digital environments, and how these experiences influence their language proficiency development and teaching practices.

Research design

As a qualitative case study, this research offered a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of teachers' living and learning experiences in AS. Following Stake (2000) the point of case-study research, is to learn enough about a particular phenomenon, which is teachers' affinity spaces and their living and learning within them. The selection of a case study research design considered that it offered several advantages that make it suitable for conducting an in-depth investigation of individual cases. First, it allowed to focus on a limited number of participants (in this case, three teachers of English), enabling a detailed examination of their unique experiences in AS. By studying these individual cases, we delved deeply into the participants' lived experiences, motivations, interests, norms, rules, roles and frequency of participation, and the ways in which these spaces enhanced their language proficiency and teaching practices. The design allowed us to examine the living and learning taking place as well as to explore the unique features of each case, which might be crucial for gaining a deeper understanding of teachers' adaptation to AS. Secondly, a contextual understanding was possible since the case study design emphasizes understanding the context in which teachers live and learn.

Data collection procedures

This case study allowed flexibility in data collection methods, such as semi-structured interviews and video recorded observations of their interactions in AS. This flexibility enabled to adapt the data collection approach to the specific needs and circumstances of each participant, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

Semi-structured interviews are personal and flexible interviews that allow for open-ended questioning and exploration of participants' experiences, emotions, feelings, and opinions regarding the research subject (Powell et al., 2005). There were two semi structure interviews, and with each of the teachers participating in the study (Emily, Caroline, and David). These used open-ended questions and were audio recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were edited for language accuracy and clarity of pronunciation. During the interviews, the researchers engaged in direct and personal conversations with the participants to gather in-depth information about their living and learning experiences in AS. Specific topics were covered during the interviews such as: types of AS teachers engaged in (e.g., social media platforms, discussion forums, educational websites), motivations for participating, purposes that drove their interest and dedication. Likewise, interactions and collaborations within AS, including how they collaborate, network, and exchange information, as well as the language learning experiences within the AS, such as reading, writing, and communication in English, and professional learning.

Also, there was an examination among the participants about how the experiences in AS have impacted their English language proficiency, language teaching, instructional strategies, and classroom activities. The semi-structured interview process allowed to gain a deeper understanding of the teachers' personal experiences, thoughts, and reflections related to their engagement in AS and how these connect to their language learning or teaching practices.

Additionally, Video recorded observations of participants' interactions in AS were used, and following Rustin (2012) these combine participation in the lives of the people studied with the maintenance of a professional distance that allows adequate observation and recording of data. Three observations were recorded for each participant, capturing their interactions within the AS they usually participate. These video recordings provided valuable visual data to complement the interview findings and offer a more holistic view of the teachers' experiences in

real-time contexts. The nature of the video recorded interactions involved capturing the teachers' active engagement in online discussions, collaborative activities, and knowledge-sharing within AS. The researchers paid close attention to the teachers' language use, communication, collaboration, roles, their involvement in language-related practices and academic sites. It was also observed how the participants navigated and utilized the various features of the AS for language learning and networking purposes.

By combining semi-structured interviews and video recorded observations of their interactions in AS the researchers were able to triangulate the data, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the teachers' living and learning experiences in AS. The combination of these methods enriched the data analysis and allowed to answer the research question.

Data analysis

Transcriptions from the interviews and video recorded observations were uploaded to Nvivo and two cycles of coding were used. The participants utterances with a complete thought were used as units of analysis. It means that complete sentences or even expressions were taken into account (e.g. "lol!"). During the first cycle, descriptive coding was used. It is defined as a method in which the coder "assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase (...) the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (Saldaña p. 262, 2013). The research question guided the choice for each topic: portals and endeavors, communication and collaboration and roles. For the second cycle, focused coding, a method that categorizes coded data based on thematic or conceptual similarity and allows for identifying most salient categories based on their frequency or meaningfulness (Saldaña, 2013) was used. In this cycle, initial codes were reviewed and grouped into the most logical categories. After the second cycle of coding, the analysis resulted in three categories answering the research question. These are: participating in out-of-class affinity space portals (social networks and video games) with common endeavors, collaboration and communication in online affinity spaces and teachers' role shifting.

Ethical issues

There were ethical issues considered with the purpose of overcoming participants' anxiety when the researcher scrutinized their personal literacy practices for

living and learning in AS. This implied dealing with some difficulties of morality when unpleasant situations arose and demanded to avoid them. To start, a statement of an informed consent from the participants was done. The study's purpose and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time were explained. Also, there was approval from the institutional review board to use information that could be related to the institution. Also, as researchers, we always adopted the role of a "lurker" and took a passive and non-intrusive approach to observe and monitor online discussions or activities without actively engaging or contributing. The decision to be a "lurker" was motivated by the desire to respect and protect the participants' privacy and autonomy. By maintaining a professional distance and not actively participating, the researchers avoided any interference with the natural interactions and behaviors of the participants within the affinity spaces. This approach minimized the risk of altering the participants' experiences or behaviors due to the presence of the researchers.

Additionally, the researchers-maintained confidentiality and anonymity by using pseudonyms for the participants (David, Emily, and Caroline) and avoiding the use of any personally identifiable information in the reporting of the findings. This safeguarded the participants' privacy and protected them from potential harm or negative consequences that could arise from their involvement in the study.

Findings

This section describes David, Emily and Caroline engagement in AS for living and learning. A personal profile for each case is stated so that it was possible to understand their living and learning experiences in AS.

The first participant was David, a 31-year-old teacher of English. With over 12 years of teaching experience, he specializes in instructing both adults and teenagers. David graduated as an English language teacher and holds a master's degree in Applied linguistics to the teaching of English as a foreign language. He emerges as an enthusiastic fan of video games, and he characterizes himself as an individual deeply integrated with novel technologies in both his personal and professional spheres. His engagement with AS such as videogaming and other social networks is more for personal purposes than professional or academic.

Participating in out-of-class affinity space portals with common endeavors

In the first interview David was asked about portals on the internet where he held interactions using English either for personal or professional purposes. David concentrated to describe his participation in a specific video game or portal called “Saint Seiya Awakening” which allows him to hold a personal endeavor which is to communicate with other gamers using English. From the video game he further explained he participates in another portal which is Discord, a live streaming platform where he shares live videos with multiplayer. David noticed that although the game has audio or text chat features, he and his friends prefer Discord because it affords the option of private servers (i.e., spaces within the platform where users could gather to chat via text or audio).

According to him, there was always motivation towards gaming and David stated: “in my free time I like playing a game called Saint Seiya Awakening”. He further stated: “I have been playing this game since 2019 with friends and acquaintances I met while doing so”. David enjoyed playing the video game due to its narrative and expanded “It is like the manga Zodiac Knights”. He explained he has a joint endeavor which is to train knights of the zodiac, winning battles as a single or as a multiplayer and always communicating in English. In his description of the video game, he commented: “here, we fight and win battles as a single player or as multiplayers”. In other words, in the game he has created a joint endeavor which is to train knights of the zodiac, winning battles as a single or as a multiplayer.

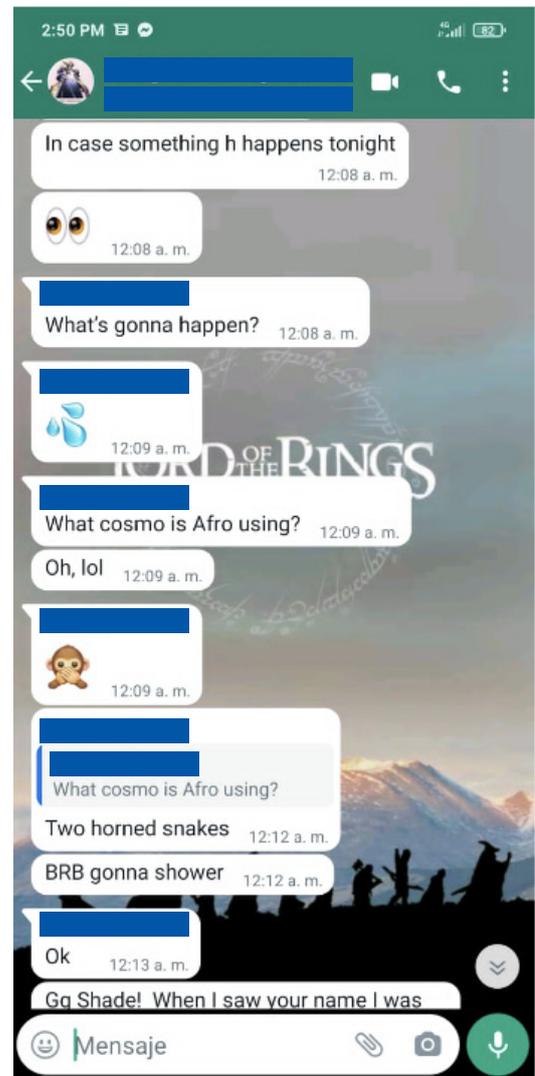
After years of playing and particularly during the Covid 19 outbreak, David reported that he had enough time to play at home and said, “the game was a space where I felt a sense of community where my participation was usually driven by my passion as a video gamer and where interactions happen always in English”. While participating in the video game, David also pointed practicing and improving his English language skills and particularly writing while communicating with other people:

My participation has helped me to improve my writing in English a lot, since everyone in the game likes to write on the WhatsApp group, and it is mandatory to write in English. this has allowed him to recognize that communication is also through writing within the game and out of it.

However, his interactions did not only happen in one portal, the video game, but he used other portals to maintain communication and referred to WhatsApp

as another AS designed to stay in constant contact with other gamers and avoid the drama that sometimes occurred on the video game chats, which David described as mostly “uncomfortable”. The following is David’s WhatsApp conversation with friends from the video game:

As shown in the previous screenshot, David engaged with a larger group of people in another Affinity Space (AS): WhatsApp, which offers a more private setting. Here, his membership also revolved around the topic of the video game. The language used by David and his friends tends to exhibit a distinctive blend of specialized and casual terminology for communication. For instance, in one exchange, David inquired, “What cosmos is Afro using?” And his friend responded, “two horned snakes”. The conversation often maintains an informal and relaxed tone, akin to a friendly chat. For instance, the participants might use “lol,” an acronym commonly employed in online and text messaging jargon, signifying “Laugh Out Loud”. This acronym indicates that something is funny or amusing, providing a means to express humor in written communication. Another illustration is “BRB,” an abbreviation for “Be Right Back”. People use this acronym to signal a temporary departure from the conversation or activity, with the intention of returning shortly.



Screenshot 1. David’s chat on WhatsApp

Throughout this conversation, David and his friends employed gaming jargon, abbreviations, and acronyms that are well-recognized within the gaming community. Additionally, emojis and GIFs were frequently integrated to enhance the discourse, conveying emotions or reactions specific to gameplay. Overall, the language used in this WhatsApp conversation underscores a shared enthusiasm for gaming and fosters a sense of camaraderie among the participants.

However, David also reported that within this AS, he and his friends occasionally engaged in discussions about politics, TV shows, news, manga, anime, and other topics. This indicates that David's interactions with others are not exclusively centered around the video game; they have extended to encompass other subjects, reflecting the characteristic of AS to share common interests. For instance, in one of his WhatsApp posts, David posed a question: "What do you guys think, who will win the elections in Colombia?" This conversation unfolded in English, and individuals who were not from Colombia participated, offering their perspectives on the topic. Furthermore, conversations revolved around sharing tips and suggestions to enhance their skills in the "Saint Seiya Awakening" game.

On the other hand, while sharing a common endeavor or interest with the group, daily contributions involved the sharing of memes, pictures, videos, or links spanning a wide range of topics. David's engagement in AS appeared to grant him the opportunity to engage in both individual and collective learning across various subjects. This proved beneficial for everyone within the group and contributed to their enhanced performance in the game. Furthermore, within the WhatsApp group, David shared links to videos aimed at aiding the group in improving their game performance, along with a statement: "Go to the following link, and I suggest you guys try to enhance your weapons and armors to increase your chances of winning the next battle". This endeavor required him to explore specific video game subreddits (forums on Reddit dedicated to particular topics), where he discovers tips and tricks related to video games.

David's narrative revolved around his personal interest in video gaming, from which he has acquired a substantial amount of English through texting and speaking. His experiences provide evidence of a strong connection to AS, driven by his passion for gaming and the opportunity it presents to engage using the English language. Moreover, David's active participation in the video game group has not only allowed him to enjoy gaming but has also required him to comprehend and adhere to the community's rules. The foremost rule mandates daily gameplay, and he emphasized, "All of us must participate daily in the game to track our goals and improvements." Furthermore, he elaborated that the game enforces engagement in daily, weekly, and monthly activities. David elucidated this aspect, stating:

...because practically being quite active at certain times of the day you must be connected to be able to carry out these tasks that the game itself requires.... and they are agreed with the other members, but they

are not mandatory or are not imposed by the game itself, but rather, concerted and agreed with the rest of the members.

In essence, David's account portrays how his pursuit of gaming proficiency has driven him to engage with the English language, while his involvement in the video game community has acquainted him with both in-game and communal regulations.

The second communal rule emphasizes the significance of communication, extending beyond mere oral interaction to encompass text-based exchanges. This form of communication transpires through platforms such as WhatsApp or Discord, where David engaged in both textual correspondence and verbal discussions with fellow gamers. It was underlined by David that communication, as established within the community, should be characterized by respect, tolerance, and the avoidance of sharing violent imagery or promoting explicit content. David articulated this concept:

Sometimes, our group has mixed language interactions among all the participants in the group, since most of us are Hispanic speakers; however, there are some members from the USA, which is the reason why we use Discord, for interacting, commenting, and live streaming. Most of our interactions are in English, we rarely use Spanish to communicate.

This rule highlights the importance of effective and respectful communication within the gaming community, fostering interaction across linguistic backgrounds and promoting a sense of unity and cooperation.

As a third rule, he reported that players are expected to exhibit good behavior. In David's words, "This game enforces rules pertaining to proper conduct, using appropriate vocabulary when engaging with others, and respecting diverse opinions." This underlying principle gives rise to a fourth rule: a strict prohibition against cheating among gamers. This translates to participants refraining from attempting to manipulate others' abilities or employing malicious software to gain an unfair advantage.

Additionally, a fourth mandates consistent daily participation, as David elaborated, "Participants must allocate time to the daily game events, which occur at specific times of the day. Failing to be present during these events can lead to forfeiting the rewards they offer." Consequently, this rule necessitates David's investment of

time in honing his gaming skills, thereby enhancing his performance, and increasing his chances of triumphing in battles to secure valuable rewards. Finally, the fifth rule, English emerges as the primary language for communication within the Affinity Space, “using English is mandatory”, David stated. Regardless of whether interactions commence within the in-game chat or extend to the WhatsApp group, English is the designated medium of communication. This linguistic consistency further underscores the communal emphasis on fostering an environment conducive to English language usage and proficiency enhancement.

In summary, the rules governing the gaming community within the “Saint Seiya Awakening” Affinity Space are designed to cultivate an environment of respect, collaboration, and fair play. Participants are guided by core principles. Collectively, these rules do not only govern gameplay mechanics but also emphasize the nurturing of a vibrant, respectful, and supportive gaming affinity space. The participants’ adherence to these principles reinforces the overarching goal of mutual growth, skill development, and enjoyment within the realm of “Saint Seiya Awakening”.

Collaboration and communication in online affinity spaces

David’s interactions always demanded him to use English to communicate in the game since many gamers are native speakers of English or there are others who simply speak the language while talking about the game. Also, during these interactions, David usually offered feedback related to their performance in the game due to his expertise. In this regard he commented how this has helped him to learn English:

When these meetings are held, especially in Discord, they are native people from the USA using expressions of the game that suddenly when you have it set in Spanish, you don’t use and understand. When talking and listening with native people, native speakers, because obviously it helps to strengthen your own level of both listening and speaking.

David was also aware that this is an opportunity to use the language with the gamers and for authentic communicative purposes. He transcended the conversation to another AS: WhatsApp, where the conversation about the game continued only that this time it was private and only with an exclusive number of members who were part of the team:

The conversation begins with one of David’s mates sharing news about his in-game experience, saying, “I was lucky my Alone didn’t die, otherwise it’s gg for me”. This sparked interest and enthusiasm among the participants, displaying their active engagement with the game. Importantly, the conversation also demonstrates the robust sense of community within the group, reflecting the close-knit nature of their interactions. The participants did not only discuss gameplay intricacies but also engaged in friendly banter, sharing experiences and strategies in a collaborative manner.

Also, throughout the conversation, the use and practice of English were evident, with participants comfortably communicating complex gaming concepts and expressing their thoughts. The camaraderie and shared excitement became palpable as participants encouraged each other and celebrated achievements. For instance, one participant stated, “Yeah, it’s pretty good; is pretty easy to use”, meaning that the mechanics of the game were quite straightforward and user-friendly. This exchange underscores how the shared interest in the game facilitates the organic use of English, providing participants with a platform to communicate, interact, and bond while navigating the challenges and victories of the virtual gaming world.

Teachers’ role-shifting

David’s comprehension of interaction dynamics within the gaming sphere extended to the recognition of the importance of role-shifting. In this context, he identified himself as a competitor, collaborator, or leader, roles he fulfilled adeptly. This assertion is substantiated by concrete evidence, a video that highlights his



Screenshot 2. David’s WhatsApp Interaction with Friends from the Video Game

interactions on Discord with another gamer. The video record interaction portrayed David not only as a competitor but also as a collaborator, actively assisting others in achieving their in-game objectives and refining their avatars. This engagement led David to say: “I have established a legion”, meaning that he has a collective group of companions. And as this group of players was united by shared objectives he explained: “as a legion we need collective training and the strength the avatar characters”. David emphasizes the significance of this communal bond:

Belonging to a community becomes mandatory because otherwise, you are at a disadvantage in relation to someone who belongs to a community. If you decide not to belong, obviously you are not going to get the rewards that the other person who does belong gets, so it forces you, it is like a rule that the very environment of the game forces you to belong to a community.

The very structure of the game environment compels individuals to align themselves with a group, effectively establishing belongingness as a prerequisite for survival and advancement. David also embodied the role of a leader within the gaming framework, facilitating the creation of a sense of belonging among fellow gamers and states: “I usually contact people but also support them whenever needed in that way we can win our battles”. David’s role as a leader and his active involvement in cultivating a sense of community underline the intricate interplay between individual progress and collective camaraderie within the game’s ecosystem. His actions display how the game’s inherent dynamics promote collaborative engagement and the formation of a cohesive player network.

The second participant was Emily, a 25-year-old English teacher who specializes in working with children at a private bilingual school. She graduated as an English language teacher 5 years ago and holds a master’s degree in teaching English. Emily is renowned for her pronounced enthusiasm for leveraging social networks and embracing technology to improve her teaching.

Participation in online portals and endeavors

During the initial interview, Emily discussed her participation in different social networks: Instagram and Facebook. She referred to Instagram, portraying it as a personal portal that facilitates her connections with friends and relatives. She reported that in social networks she maintains a public life and a public profile, al-

though she primarily shares a higher proportion of posts with her close friends. Regarding Instagram, she perceived this as an “option” the social network offers to disseminate information within a restricted circle of acquaintances where she likes using English. Interestingly, when asked about other interactions on Instagram where she also uses English, Emily suddenly unveiled another dimension of her engagement with the platform or another endeavor. She revealed using it to remain informed and expand her knowledge across various subjects, focusing on teaching-related insights:

I use it to learn about English tips for myself, teaching tips and also tips for material design for classes.

This revelation underscores how Emily capitalizes on Instagram not only as a social conduit but also as a valuable channel for ongoing professional development. Her engagement displayed a multifaceted use of the platform, encompassing personal connections, information dissemination, and a proactive pursuit of learning to enhance her teaching. Much like David, Emily also found herself drawn to an affinity space driven by a shared endeavor rooted in mutual values, ideals, and interests. However, in stark contrast to David, Emily’s engagement took on a distinctive facet, and she revealed in crafting and disseminating her professional expertise. Her membership extended to “Teachers Pay Teachers”, a platform where she actively participated in the exchange of educational resources. On this one, Emily did not only explore others’ contributions but also offered her own creations for sale:

**Fourth Bakery– Fractions for kids
Performance Task**



Grade Levels
3rd

Subjects
Arithmetic, Fractions, Word Problems

Standards
 CCSS 3.OA.C.7 CCSS 3.NF.A.1 CCSS 3.NF.A.3a
 CCSS MP2 CCSS MP4 [show more](#)

Resource Type
Worksheets, Activities, Lesson

Formats Included
✓ Zip

Pages
10 pages

[View Preview](#)

\$4.90

List Price: ~~\$7.00~~
You Save: **\$2.10**

[Add one to cart](#)

[Buy licenses to share](#)

[Add to Wish List](#)

Share this resource

[f](#) [t](#) [p](#)

[Report this resource to TPT](#)

Screenshot 3. Emily’s teacherpreneurship in Teachers Pay Teachers.

She stated :

I am part of Teacher Pay Teachers, a community in which you share the resources you have created, and you can also obtain and buy resources that other people have createdI am part of them more than four years ago since I started working at the school that I met them. I know the way in which they are organized, how to distribute the space, the links, how to do it, I learned it intuitively, messing around the pages.

Emily's participation in this portal involves a meticulous design of teaching materials, particularly geared towards instructing young learners in the English language. These crafted resources find their place within the global community of educators, transcending geographical boundaries. This is the essence of Emily's teacherpreneurship, a dynamic action that encompasses the unique opportunity for a teacher to offer her specialized services as a professional within the education realm. However, Emily's teacherpreneurial journey stands out as she assumes the role of an academic content designer, catering to foreign language students and contributing to the pedagogical landscape. Her active involvement in sharing innovative teaching activities demonstrates her commitment to advancing the educational experience and underscores her role as a dedicated contributor within the broader community of educators.

Collaboration and communication in online affinity spaces

Emily also discussed her engagement with Facebook, highlighting its role as an academic portal. Her involvement spans a decade, during which she has actively followed English teacher groups. Within these groups, Emily has gained access to a wealth of educational resources, ranging from worksheets and flashcards to interactive and digital materials. Through her interactions, she has engaged with fellow participants who contribute teaching materials and offer feedback on their practical implementation in her classes. Differently to David, Emily's primary objective was to continually enhance her pedagogical knowledge and proficiency in teaching and learning English, to support her students' learning journey. In Emily's words, "Facebook has been instrumental in expanding my horizons. I've connected with numerous groups where the focus is on learning and improvement, particularly in areas related to English language teaching". She added: "One notable group is 'Sabes inglés', which I have been using it as a resource, joining the group provided me with a deeper understanding of linguistic nuances, expressions, and language structure".

Emily's engagement extends beyond a mere consumption of resources; she actively seeks out additional groups of English language teachers. She is drawn to the affiliations of other educators and makes decisions to join groups based on shared interests. As she articulated, "I observe the communities they belong to, and if I find a match, I'm inclined to participate. It's a way to expand my horizons and connect with like-minded professionals who speak English". Despite her inclination to be more of an observer within these groups, Emily recognized the value of native speakers' contributions. This provides her with a unique opportunity to glean insights into teaching English as a foreign language from those who possess innate language proficiency. Importantly, Emily grasped that the cohesion of these groups stems from a shared interest in learning, rather than being delineated by age or gender.

Her emphasis also lied on the language the participants speak as an indicator of linguistic and cultural perspectives. Therefore, Facebook emerges as a facilitator for the creation of Affinity Spaces tailored to educators, where shared professional interests drive collaborative learning, resource-sharing, and communication to exchange of pedagogical insights. Emily's active involvement underscores the platform's potential as a fertile ground for cultivating spaces rooted in a mutual passion for educational advancement.

Teachers' role-shifting

In contrast to David, Emily exhibits a greater inclination towards AS for educational purposes rather than personal motives. During the same interview, she delved into her use of WhatsApp, highlighting its utility not only for staying in touch with friends but also as a valuable tool for professional communication. In her own words, "I frequently employ WhatsApp as a means of communication not only with friends but also with colleagues". Emily acknowledges that WhatsApp serves as an effective platform for connecting with colleagues in a work context, emphasizing its role in facilitating interactions with fellow teachers and parents. She elaborates, "We employ WhatsApp to share plans, learning materials, coordinate availability for student inquiries, and address school-related contingencies." Nonetheless, Emily is also candid about a challenge she encounters, "although, there a phenomenon of message flooding". This refers to the overwhelming influx of messages that can occur in group chats. Within these interactions, Emily takes on a collaborative role. The content shared within these groups undergoes transformation as various participants contribute their perspectives and insights. This collaborative process

ensures that the content is not solely the product of experts but is enriched by contributions from individuals across diverse levels of expertise.

Emily's engagement with AS, particularly through platforms like WhatsApp, exemplifies her commitment to leveraging digital spaces for educational collaborations, sharing resources, and fostering efficient communication among colleagues. Her perspective emphasizes the dynamic interplay between personal and professional realms within the digital landscape. Although, she did not expand much on her roles, she seems to have bonded for a professional interest and here she is a collaborator and learner.

The third participant was Caroline, she stands out as a 33-year-old educator deeply engaged in various AS. She finished her undergraduate studies more than 10 years ago and holds a master in English language teaching. Her association with AS is notable as she does not only participate actively but also holds a significant tenure as a teacher, surpassing that of the other two participants. Caroline's interaction with new literacies appears multifaceted, with her pursuits encompassing diverse objectives. Among her motivations, one salient purpose emerges: the acquisition of knowledge across a range of subjects coupled with the integration of new literacies into her classes, all aimed at bolstering her teaching practice.

Participation in online portals and endeavors

Caroline shares with David and Emily her engagement in a dynamic exchange with individuals geographically distant, aimed at either enhancing her English proficiency or acquiring knowledge to enrich her professional practice. Reflecting on the monumental shift to online education prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Caroline underscores the rapidity and scale of the transition. In response to this challenge, she reports, "I proactively delved into multiple websites and social networks for distinct purposes". Specifically, she referenced Facebook, which allows her to join an English teacher group, where educators from around the world share content, materials, and tips to enhance their classroom abilities. Within this portal, Caroline described her endeavor: "I am an active consumer and participant, making comments, and providing feedback to peers regarding the usefulness and effectiveness of activities shared by other members before implementing them in my own context."

Caroline prominently cited Facebook as a key portal, recounting her active role within an international English teacher group. She stated, "Here, educators from

around the world unite to share a wealth of content, materials, and pedagogical insights”. She further added, “..my engagement is far from passive; I meticulously evaluate and comment on fellow members’ contributions, assessing the relevance and efficacy within my own teaching context”. Notably, Caroline’s interaction on Facebook bridges her personal affinity for language learning with her professional commitment to effective instruction.

Her narrative takes an intriguing turn as Caroline was guided to explore her interactions with another social media phenomenon, TikTok. Initially a source of personal amusement, TikTok’s popularity gradually transformed it into an unexpected pedagogical resource. Caroline said, “I took the initiative to craft and disseminate brief looping videos, tailored for informal learning with my students”. These videos, often sourced from the #ForYou page, epitomize her evolving journey from personal gratification to educational innovation. Caroline’s adaptation of TikTok for instructional purposes highlights her adaptability and resourcefulness. Caroline expanded on this portal and said, “I use Tik Tok for entertaining myself after work, but then I find some content regarding English tips for myself or teaching English tips, and I save the video to apply it later with my students”.

Caroline reported her decision to integrate TikTok into her English classes and added, “they have become a resource for teaching English”. Here, she noticed how she started with a personal purpose and transitions to a professional one, driven by her professional interests. This transition not only symbolizes her pedagogical prowess but also underscores her ability to seamlessly intertwine personal and professional aspirations.

Teachers’ role shifting

Caroline also showed evidence of being an active participant in TikTok’s challenges and duets, “I follow tutorials, stories on Instagram, or Tik-Tok about DIY (do it yourself), but then I encourage my colleagues and students to do the same”. Caroline did not only contribute to the platform’s trends but also tried to inspire and lead others to harness its potential. She acted as a facilitator for the creation and dissemination of knowledge, instilling a sense of participation and engagement among her peers and students alike. Additionally, as a user, Caroline was motivated to participate in challenges and connect via duets, all the while encouraging others to join and contribute. She extended this encouragement to her students, advocating for their involvement in creating content related to English tips.

Caroline’s narrative reveals her adeptness at pursuing diverse endeavors, orchestrating self-directed learning journeys, and seamlessly assimilating into various communities. Her immersion in these spaces necessitates a command of semiotics, linguistics, and discursive strategies, all in a foreign language. Caroline’s mastery of this linguistic landscape enables her to navigate slang and professional discourse, highlighting her innovative thinking and adaptability. In essence, Caroline’s trajectory exemplifies the power of collaboration, the fluidity of roles, and the transformative potential of technology in the realm of education. Her narrative underscores the intricate interplay between personal growth and professional development.

Discussion

The presented discussion section elucidates the findings from David, Emily, and Caroline, providing comprehensive insights of their engagement in Affinity Spaces (AS). Each participant’s unique profile and experiences highlight distinct ways in which they leverage digital platforms for personal, professional, and educational growth. Thus, following Gee (2004), the participants’ involvement in AS means joining affinity spaces to share common endeavors, where they are drawn together by a shared practice or passion. The AS reported emphasize interaction with people who also speak English rather than merely focusing on community membership. Furthermore, AS such as social networks and video gaming platforms empower participants to come together in virtual or real-world settings, “breaking down barriers associated with gender, race, nationality, or language” (Gee, 2005, p. 220). Consequently, these findings underscore the notion that, the landscape of new and emerging technologies is not only shaping but also being shaped by virtual interactions and engagements, thereby rendering knowledge fluid, multi-dimensional, and immediate (cited in Albers et al., 2016, p. 241).

To start, David’s immersion in the world of video gaming exhibits the power of shared passions and a desire for language development. Moreover, his interactions within the gaming community, especially on Discord, emphasize the immersive and authentic use of English for communication. He describes how his participation in the gaming space has improved his oral communication and writing skills and exposed him to specialized gaming terminology, contributing to his language development. David’s involvement in video gaming resonates with Curwood et al. (2013), who argue that affinity spaces extend the confines of traditional classrooms. These spaces ignite motivation for engagement in diverse and intricate ways of reading, writing, and speaking, as seen in David’s experiences.

On the other hand, Emily's engagement in AS, particularly on Instagram and Teachers Pay Teachers, displays her integration of English language learning, teaching techniques, and material design, exemplifying how digital platforms can be harnessed for continuous professional development and knowledge enhancement. Also, Emily's participation in Facebook groups provides her with opportunities to engage with a global community of English language educators. Through discussions, resource sharing, and feedback exchange, she refines her language skills while acquiring teaching-related insights. Emily's involvement exemplifies how AS can serve as spaces for language learning, professional collaboration, and the exchange of pedagogical knowledge. Her experiences align seamlessly with the perspective put forth by Carpenter et al. (2020), wherein they describe these collaborative virtual environments as venues for individuals to converge and share information, materials, and ideas across a spectrum of subjects.

Meanwhile, Caroline's transformation from personal engagement on TikTok to educational innovation underscores the adaptability and creativity inherent in AS participation. Caroline's narrative reveals a unique trajectory, where her initial personal engagement with portals such as TikTok evolves into a valuable pedagogical resource. By curating and sharing short videos related to English language tips, she leverages the platform for both personal entertainment and educational enhancement. Her willingness to adapt and integrate digital tools into her teaching practice unveils the potential of AS to facilitate language acquisition and communication. By engaging in challenges and encouraging her students to participate, Caroline establishes herself as a facilitator of collaborative learning, extending the educational experience beyond traditional boundaries. Her experiences closely mirror the observations of Harvey & Hyndman (2018) regarding teachers embracing social media to satisfy their needs linked to professional identity, community, and emotional support.

Collectively, these cases underscore that AS serve as dynamic arenas where language learners and educators alike thrive, fostering language proficiency, pedagogical insights, and a sense of global community. This alignment resonates with Li and Greenhow (2015), which asserts that AS yield positive outcomes by facilitating connections, collaborations, and content sharing, thereby nurturing social presence, and fostering the establishment of academic or personal relationships. Their experiences offer valuable insights into the potential benefits and limitations of different platforms, providing a compelling narrative of how digital spaces can empower individuals in their journey of language acquisition and teaching excellence.

Moreover, it is highlighted that in this context, participants demonstrate that they no longer solely “possess” knowledge; rather, they continually learn through new literacies on the internet, which subsequently propel them into AS. Parallel to the insights of Halaczkiwicz (2020), these spaces magnetize participants who eagerly share their passions, spanning popular culture, video games, and, as evidenced in this study, an interest in learning English as a foreign language and improving their teaching practice.

The data also substantiate our perspective that AS are intrinsic to participants’ lives and in agreement with Moore (1997) a high degree of self-motivation, self-discipline, and self-direction, relying on autonomous and directive-free learning. Their accounts reveal active engagement across several online spaces, where they interact through a myriad of portals, each aligned with diverse endeavors. These portals commonly include video games, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, and even academic sites such as Teachers Pay Teachers. Within these digital realms, participants navigate a spectrum of experiences, from enjoyable language learning to improved teaching techniques, and even teacherpreneurship. Echoing Gee (2007), participants primarily align with an endeavor or interest, communicating with speakers of English, collaborating, and forming bonds with others who share similar passions. This underscores teachers’ assertion that their participation in AS is grounded in personal interests and a mutual desire to connect with fellow foreign language speakers.

Likewise, the portals as described by the participants, foster a sense of belonging within a community where foreign languages like English prevail. Whether through native or non-native speakers, this affiliation enables active communication and knowledge sharing, thus aligning with the assertions of Albers et al. (2016). The reported portals unveil a spectrum of expertise and involvement among participants, spanning from seasoned experts to novices, and encompassing full participants to “lurkers” (Albers et al., 2016). Within these spaces, they interact with diverse content that aligns with their interests, often generating new knowledge for personal growth and pedagogical enhancement. Encounters with other individuals within these spaces extend across various communication modes, thus sustaining robust participation.

By cataloging participants’ involvement in AS, we also corroborate the observations of Carpenter et al. (2020) and Shafirova et al. (2020) that these spaces facilitate encounters between English-speaking individuals, some of whom are

educators. The driving force behind their AS entry varies, but it primarily stems from shared ideas, beliefs, or interests. Within these spaces, diverse forms of participation thrive, fostering reciprocal exchanges of information, knowledge sharing, and learning. Thus, AS do not only govern how knowledge is disseminated but also serve as platforms where participants internalize the norms of engagement and interaction.

It is noteworthy that participants exercise autonomy in selecting and engaging with their chosen portals, often juggling multiple platforms simultaneously. This flexibility grants them a sense of status. As observed among participants and highlighted by Gee (2009), assuming distinct roles like collaborators, leaders, learners, designers, or facilitators may not be a goal for all. In some instances, participants preferred to remain knowledge consumers while gradually transitioning into content creators. This shift may stem from a focus on personal learning that eventually extends to professional application.

The findings further resonate with research indicating that AS function as spaces for creating and sharing self-generated content (Grimes & Fields, 2015) or as sources of inspiration for revitalizing formal educational settings (Knobel & Lankshear, 2014). These also concur with Gee (2004) since teachers' participation in AS go beyond casual interactions with friends and acquaintances; it involves joining a global community that shares common interests and endeavors.

Despite the spontaneity and organic nature of AS practices, participants deliberately opt for specific portals and endeavors, driven by an innate passion. In contrast to other studies (Sauro & Sundmark, 2016), the participants do not appear to leverage these spaces significantly to enhance skills like writing. There is not sufficient evidence suggesting that participants use AS to create critical discussions based on favorite topics. Only David reported engaging in written discussions while playing video games. The findings align with prior studies conducted with pre-service English language teachers from the same university these participants completed their undergraduate studies. These studies highlight that affinity spaces serve as conduits for global communication in English, language learning, and teaching improvement (Jerez-Rodríguez & Navas-Ríos, 2019; Jerez-Rodríguez & Cote-Parra, 2022). However, in these spaces, content design, development of writing skills and critical analysis of topics of interest were less common.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the case studies of David, Emily, and Caroline illuminate the transformative potential of AS in the realm of English language learning and teaching. Teachers are living and learning in AS since these are social settings for active participation, which allow constant debate and exchange of new topics regarding their personal or professional interests. Their participation in AS was spontaneous, they enthusiastically engaged in new literacies, and the intensity of that participation was high. One probable reason was that these spaces are fueled by their passion to communicate, collaborate with others in virtual spaces not only to get information, be consumers of knowledge, share their knowledge, their own designed materials or teaching ideas on different topics, and continue learning a foreign language and through the language. Additionally, teachers seem to be expanding their boundaries of the classroom while engaging in new and complex ways with reading, writing, speaking, and this might be the result of the nature of the bilingual environment they are part of which may impact their language use and interactions within affinity spaces. The insights from these case studies offer a valuable roadmap for harnessing the power of AS to foster meaningful learning experiences, authentic communication, and innovative teaching practices among English language teachers.

Further research could be designed to measure the effects of AS on reading or writing performance, but also on speaking and listening. Even though there have been several studies on affinity spaces, much needs to be learned in the field of foreign language learning and its practical classroom applications. The domestication of AS for the foreign language classroom must be carefully crafted so as not to corrupt the advantages of these spaces.

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