



CHARACTERISTICS OF INFORMAL LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Informal learning can be defined as a particular way of learning which arises from the activities and interests of individuals and groups. After having identified and selected interests expressed by learners, informal-learning activities are carried out in a flexible and informal way, in informal community locations. According to Marcia Conner (Marcia L. Conner), "Informal learning accounts for over 75% of the learning taking place in organizations today. Often, the most valuable learning takes place serendipitously, by random chance." Conner continues explaining that Informal learning is a "lifelong process" through which people acquire attitudes, values, skills and knowledge mainly from the mass media, from daily experiences, such as those made at work, at play, while talking with our neighbors and from various kind of interactions, in general. It is apparent that informal learning is rather related to incidental learning.

FORMAL vs INFORMAL

Hawkings (2004) states that “ it is far too simplistic to assume that learning is either formal or informal. At the very least, both learner affiliations and teaching/learning activities may each be divided into formal and informal, providing a two-by-two matrixone”:

		Activity	
		formal	informal
Affiliations	formal	Lectures for groups of students	Free-choice exploration of exhibits
	informal	Adult education courses	Interactions with gallery characters

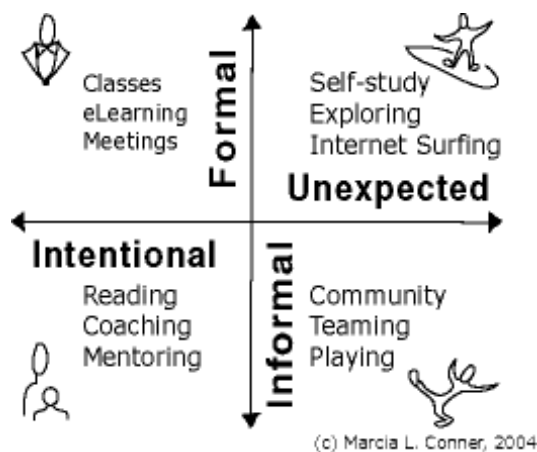
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Table 2.1 Simple analysis of formal/informal learning in museums (Hawkings, 2004).

According to Conner “most learning happens through processes not structured or sponsored by an employer or a school.” Informal learning is the term she uses to describe what happens the rest of the time. Conner differentiates between *formal* and *informal* and simplifies what is learned intentionally and what is learned accidentally.



Conner's informal learning scheme

The scheme above sums the distinctions between **formal, informal, and non-formal**. These concepts were first developed in the 1950s by people working in the area of international development.

10 Characteristics of Informal Learning

Before you ever go to school or take part in a Mom-and-tot program, informal learning starts the day you are born and continues on until the day you die. Here are the characteristics of informal learning:

1. Informal learning is never organized.

There are no set formulas or guidelines. Examples of informal learning include activities such as teaching your child the alphabet, or how to brush his or her teeth. There is no prescriptive program of study for this.

2. Informal learners are often highly motivated to learn.

Unlike the formal learning environment of school, informal learners are often eager and attentive. A teenager showing a friend how to find an “Easter egg” in a video game is an



example of informal learning. The gamer really wants to find out how to achieve his goal, so he embarks on a journey to figure out how. His friend becomes his teacher.

3. Informal learning is often spontaneous.

Learning happens anywhere, any time. The learner is inspired to learn because of an immediate desire to know how to do something or understand a topic. Or an informal “teacher” sees an opportunity to share their knowledge or wisdom with someone else. For example, we were recently standing in line at the airport waiting to go through security. There was a family in front of us. The father, who was holding the hand of his young son, who was about seven or eight, used the posters on the wall of the security area to teach the boy to read new words. The boy sounded out the words and they talked about the content of the poster. This not only helped to pass the time during a long wait, it was a great example of spontaneous informal learning.

4. There is no formal curriculum.

There is no program of study or prescriptive methods. Whatever methods used are the one that the person teaching knows how to teach... often based on their own experience.

5. The “teacher” is someone who cares – and who has more experience than the learner.

Even the word “teacher” here is a bit of a misnomer because professional teachers all have credentials, certificates or a teaching license. In the informal learning context, those leading the learning are likely to be emotionally close to the person who is learning, such as a mother, father, grandparent or other caregiver. An adult child teaching an older parent how to use new technology is an example.

6. The world is your classroom

It is a myth that learning happens in a school or in a classroom. With informal learning, there is no classroom. Your home, the neighborhood park, the community and the world are the classroom.

7. Informal learning is difficult to quantify.

There are no exams and informal learning is difficult to quantify.



8. Often dismissed by academics and skeptics as being worthless.

Informal learning is often overlooked and not regarded as particularly valid learning. Some researchers and academics (though not all of us!) have the opinion that informal learning is less valuable than formal, prescriptive learning (due, in part, to the fact that it is difficult to quantify... and they believe that if it can not be quantified, it has no value).

9. Essential to a child's early development.

Learning your mother tongue is an excellent example of informal learning. Imagine if a child were not exposed to any language for the first 5 years. How difficult would that child's development become? It is an experiment that, as far as I know, has never been done. It would be considered too risky and unethical. Everything a young child learns at home is informal learning, from how to brush their teeth to how to say the alphabet to good manners. Without informal learning, we would never be able to cope in a formal learning environment.

10. Essential to an adult's lifelong learning.

Informal learning is a lifelong process. It does not end when a child enters school and the formal system "takes over". On the contrary, children continue to learn at home. As we get older, we learn from our friends. As we enter the workforce, we learn from our co-workers. Into retirement, we still learn from friends and also from those younger than us. An adult learning to read and write from a volunteer literacy tutor is one example. A retired office worker learning from her grandson how to use an iPad is another example.

Informal learning: from non-intentional to explicit and deliberate?

Informal learning is learner-controlled, not linked to any course or institution, and takes place outside the classroom. Stevens (*ibid.*: 12) defines it as:

Learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or 'incidental'/random).

However, with the normalization of online applications and the concomitant frequent exposure of non-native English speakers to English-language media and communities, the question arises of whether informal learning is still mainly random and non-intentional. In her discussion of the concepts, Rieder (2003: 28) clarifies that incidental (or 'unintentional')

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learning can involve both explicit and implicit processes; incidental explicit learning is distinguished from its counterpart by the learner's awareness of both process and product of learning.

In planning this study, one of my fundamental contentions is that the benefits of informal engagement with online English-language resources do not go unnoticed by experienced language learners. More than that, I expect the intentional aspect to gain in importance in informal environments, with students deciding to access resources such as news sites in English even though the equivalent content is available in their native language, simply because it benefits their English.

Research questions

I aim to address at least some of these points by presenting the findings of an empirical, questionnaire-based study conducted with students at of Adhiyamaan College of Engineering. I will focus on the following areas of student behaviour and attitudes:

1. frequency of use and perceptions of usefulness of technologies for the acquisition of language skills;
2. explicit/intentional learning in informal contexts;
3. reasons behind technology choices; and
4. attitudes towards technology use in class.

The first section surveys students' experiences with a variety of digital applications. It investigates how frequently a number of technologies are used, how helpful they have been for language learning in general, and how useful they are considered to be for the development of a range of language competencies (reading, writing, speaking, listening, communicative competence, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and Business English).

Section two explores the overlaps between informal, explicit, and deliberate learning. After all, technology use in informal settings is primarily driven by the intention to communicate (Toffoli and Socket op.cit.) rather than the intention to learn. Consequently, it is not necessarily to be expected that the technologies students like using in English for leisure purposes will be the same as those they consider to be highly beneficial for learning. On the other hand, if we credit students with the metacognitive skills required to reflect on their own strengths and shortcomings as language learners, it is reasonable to assume that they may engage in informal activities with the express purpose of improving certain language skills.



Section three first focuses on television series/films as the most highly ranked resource in terms of both frequency of use and skills acquisition. Drawing on student comments in the form of open-ended questionnaire responses, reasons that make this medium such an attractive learning resource are subsequently identified. Second, students' practices and views on the relative merits of communication media (in particular, Facebook and chat) will be addressed. Respondents' previously ascertained belief in the central role of communication (Trinder 2013) was not borne out by high rankings (relating to skills acquisition) of communication media in the current study. Potential reasons behind this conundrum will be discussed.

In the final section, having established participants' favourite media for informal learning (see above), their views on the 'teacher-controlled' use of technology will be explored. Given the improved access to target language resources beyond the classroom, students do not depend on teachers anymore to provide authentic audiovisual or written materials. More experienced learners in particular are able to make informed judgements about what best serves their needs and goals in independent contexts, and believe themselves similarly capable of assessing the effectiveness of classroom practices.

Participants and procedure

For the study, quantitative and qualitative data were collected by means of a questionnaire including Likert-type ratings and free text responses to open questions. The data were interpreted through a combination of descriptive statistics and a thematic analysis of open-response questions. The sample consists of 175 Austrian university students. Results provide a broad indication of how young adults—in this case, business students with intermediate to advanced-level English—practise informal learning and blend digital tools with more traditional resources.

Learning context

Regarding the wider context in which the respondents in this study learn and use English, as indicated, Austria is quite privileged concerning the availability and cost of digital resources. All the questionnaire respondents own smart phones and at least one other portable device (for example a notebook, netbook, iPad). As far as the learning environment in its narrower sense is concerned, the participants are undergraduates at the Adhiyamaan College of Engineering. They attend face-to-face English for Specific Purposes (ESP) language classes as part of their studies, which are complemented by the university's e-learning platform and customized online activities (referred to below as BE (Business English) e-learning modules).



Learner contributions

Students tend to bring their individual attributes (for example learner beliefs, learning experiences, expectations) to the classroom, and evaluate the extent to which courses meet their requirements. In turn, the perceived affordances and deficiencies of classes can be expected to influence the choice of independent resources. Thus, students often note that, due to class sizes and an emphasis on specialist (business) language, there is not enough oral interaction or opportunity to practise general English (Trinder op.cit.). For such practice, they may turn to online resources and interlocutors outside the classroom.

Findings and discussion

Quantitative data

The results attest to regular online activity in English. Tables 1 and 2 each show eight technologies, ranked according to reported frequency of use (columns 1 and 3). Column 4 details students' views on how useful the technology has been in terms of improving their English; column 5 lists the applications rated amongst the top three for their potential to develop specific skills and domains.

TABLE 1

Technologies used regularly by more than 40% of respondents

1 Rank (frequency)	2 Technology	3 Frequency: technology used regularly (daily or frequently)	4 Usefulness: has helped very much	5 Potential usefulness for specific skill (rank 1, 2, 3)
1	Online dictionaries	94%	74%	V, W
2	TV/radio/video clips/ series	73%	67%	L, P, S, CC
3	Social networking: e.g. Facebook	58%	23%	CC
4	Company or informational websites	Company websites 45% Informational websites 71%	18%	R, BE, V
5	Online news sites/journals	45%	51%	BE, R

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6	Email	43%	23%	W, R, G
7	BE e-learning modules	42%	38%	G, BE, V, W
8	Films, etc. on DVD/Blu-ray	41%	60%	L, P, S

Notes: W = writing, L = listening, S = speaking, R = reading, V = vocabulary, P = pronunciation, G = grammar, CC = communicative competence, BE = business English); bold lettering in column five indicates top ranking.

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TABLE 2

Technologies used regularly by less than 40% of respondents

1 Rank (frequency)	2 Technology	3 Frequency: technology used regularly (daily or frequently)	4 Usefulness: has helped very much	5 Potential usefulness for specific skill (rank 1, 2, 3)
9	Written chat (e.g. Skype, Messenger)	36%	23%	
10	Text messages/SMS	27%	9%	
11	E-books/books	E-books 9%	41%	
		Books 35%		
12	Online grammars	18%	22%	G
13	Voice chat (e.g. Skype, Messenger)	14%	15%	S, L, P, CC
14	Discussion forums	12%	7%	
15	Blogs	9%	7%	
16	Language learning sites/ courses	Online 5%	7%	

Notes: W = writing, L = listening, S = speaking, R = reading, V = vocabulary, P = pronunciation, G = grammar, CC = communicative competence, BE = business English); bold lettering in column five indicates top ranking.

Technologies aimed at language learning



Noteworthy are, first of all, the low rankings of discipline-specific applications (online grammars and language learning sites, ranks 12 and 16, respectively) in terms of their regularity of use and perceived usefulness. This suggests that for deliberate study, either more conventional material and social resources (for example books, teachers, native speakers) or technologies with a different primary focus (for instance news sites) are preferred. Exceptions are digital dictionaries and, a little more surprisingly, the course-specific e-learning modules. The latter are assessed as the best application for developing grammatical competence as well as being amongst the top three for three other skills. The fact that the e-learning tool offers streamlined and presumably effective practice activities for the formal written assessment may explain its good ratings.

Communication Technologies

Second, apart from Facebook and email, communication media (for example chat, discussion forums) are neither used all that much in English nor seen as particularly beneficial for learning. The data indicate that chat, texting, and discussion forums play a very minor role in students' personal learning environments. Though social media (i.e. Facebook) has gained the top ranking for communicative competence, this is the skill least well-catered for by any technology: only two-thirds (111) agree that social networking enhances communicative competence (see Figure 1).

FIGURE

Comparison of perceived learning potential for five language areas (absolute numbers)

As the only medium facilitating synchronous oral communication with an interlocutor (and consequently most resembling face-to-face conversations), voice chat has a special position amongst the technologies investigated. Figure 1 depicts the promise it holds for students in those skills areas it could reasonably be expected to benefit, comparing it to Facebook and film/television. Yet notably, though participants acknowledge its potential to improve five language areas, film/television gets better ratings for vocabulary acquisition, listening, and pronunciation. What is more, voice chat does not have a high uptake (one-third do not use it at all in English, only 14 per cent regularly), a striking contradiction given the sample's previously expressed aim to become 'fluent' speakers of English (Trinder op.cit.).

A sizeable literature attests to the benefits of computer-mediated communication, summarized in a recent meta-synthesis by Lin (2015). Yet though chat facilitates 'conversation in slow motion' (Beauvois 1992: 445), and is said to have 'loosened the tongues and the writings of even the shyest students' (Kramsch 2014: 296), the advanced learners in this study experience things differently. They assess such pared-down virtual

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environments as less useful for listening and pronunciation than immersing themselves in the richer, if no less artificial, world of film, and television, which to them appears to be offering more authentic, worthwhile language.

Audiovisual technologies

The top rankings of films and television series in terms of utility and popularity mirror the results of previous studies (Conole 2008; Stevens op.cit.; Steel and Levy op.cit.) surveying students' technology preferences. The ready availability of English-language television series via the internet is a relatively recent phenomenon in Austria and enjoys enthusiastic uptake, with about two-thirds of the sample regularly watching online. Moreover, film in its different online guises is considered the most useful medium for improving listening skills and pronunciation, and though it offers no opportunities for language production, it is amongst the three best-ranked technologies for developing pronunciation and communicative competence. Viewing current series seems to provide a rich learning experience akin to immersion, with plentiful examples of the kind of English students miss in their formal classes (cf. Trinder op.cit.), i.e. an optimal form of effortless learning whilst enjoying an everyday pastime.

In order to flesh out this quantitative account of students' technology choices, qualitative data were collected and analysed. Students' reasons for preferring to watch film and television as an informal, but in many cases intentional, learning activity will be discussed below.

Intentional learning in informal contexts

Seventy-two per cent of respondents confirmed that they deliberately engage in online activities with the explicit aim of improving certain aspects of their English. When asked to name the technology they preferred to use for intentional skills development, two types of technologies were mentioned most frequently.

On the one hand, for these business students, online news sites and journals were the obvious choices for deliberate advancement of professional or ESP vocabulary. Yet, not surprisingly given the positive ratings so far, references to television series, films, and videos were even more common. These audiovisual media are not only credited with the ability to enhance a number of skills but are consciously used for that purpose. Although the primary focus of viewing is clearly entertainment rather than, say, picking up new vocabulary, the comments below (quoted verbatim) illustrate that there has been a shift towards dual purpose engagement:



I started out watching US TV Series when I was studying for my oral A-levels and do that nearly every day ever since. It helps you a lot with your pronunciation, vocabulary and listening skill. I don't use subtitles as most US series are really easy to understand and subtitles just distract you from trying to understand what was said.

What I really like is watching movies and series in English. I do not just have fun watching these movies, I also improve my vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

That's the good thing about streaming tv series and movies, you improve your vocabulary and can decide for yourself when you learn.

Personally I like the idea to watch films, documentaries, etc. If you listen to it very attentive, you will benefit a lot in view of communication in real life.

I like watching news or films because that way one can pick up the language seemingly without effort.

The comments suggest that respondents find viewing films and series not only engaging and motivating, but also an (effortless) way of developing a number of language skills. The fact that this positive side effect is recognized and appreciated by the majority of respondents supports my hypothesis that when students choose to interact (or watch, or listen) in English rather than their native language, learning stops being a negligible by-product and becomes a deliberate, even if usually secondary, aim.

On the basis of this data, informal learning is understood to have the following characteristics: it is learner- (or peer-) rather than teacher-initiated, takes place outside class, and combines other goals (entertainment, information search, communication) with language acquisition. Particularly in the case of experienced learners, it tends to involve awareness of the acquisition process and the resulting knowledge (i.e. to be explicit), and may well be intentional.

Reasons behind preferences for film and television series

The following points were extrapolated from students' answers as well as from the inherent characteristics of the media. They are interpretative in nature, aiming to highlight the factors that make film and television such popular and potentially effective learning resources:

- motivational factors (inherent interest; effortless learning; peer group interest);
- deliberate/noticeable language development;

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- high-context exposure; social and cultural insights; pragmatics;
- familiarity of characters; repetitive dramatic situations;
- repeated exposure to chunks, idioms, everyday language, domain-specific lexis;
- different accents, registers, styles, levels of formality; and
- fast speech (help through visual clues, plot).

Reasons behind lack of uptake for voice chat

Reasons for the surprisingly lukewarm attitudes towards voice chat could be identified by means of open-ended questions. Students were asked to explain whether (and if yes, why) they found computer-mediated communication inferior to face-to-face talk.

First, poor sound quality, inferior acoustics, and disruptions/delays in transmission make it harder to pick up the finer points of language and pronunciation. As adding the video function tends to impair the transmission quality, voice chat becomes a purely aural/oral form of communication, and the most frequently expressed disadvantages concerned the missing cues of facial expressions and body language which students consider a vital aid towards understanding. Furthermore, students reported getting distracted by other applications; thus, the multifunctionality of networked/mobile devices represents a disadvantage here. Additionally, constant access to dictionaries ‘allows cheating’. Despite the fact that students appear to spend so much time communicating in virtual rather than face-to-face environments, the former were repeatedly referred to as ‘somehow artificial’ and lacking in context. Overall, computer-mediated communication is experienced as less authentic, less focused on the interlocutor and language, and less likely to lead to long-term learning than face-to-face interaction. Thus, to quote just one respondent: ‘Talking face-to-face to a person is different than video chatting. Emotions, little hints and other subconscious things can be better transmitted by direct face-to-face communication’.

These vague feelings about the ‘artificiality’ of the situation, which students express in layman’s terms, find support in a fascinating study by Kern (2014). Kern (ibid.: 341) uncovers the ‘significant mediational issues that underlie videoconferencing’ by drawing attention to the decontextualizations and distortions taking place during telecollaborative exchanges.

In-class use of technology

The physical classrooms of respondents’ face-to-face Business English classes are equipped with smartboards, projectors, and internet access, potentially facilitating the presentation of authentic, up-to-date websites as well as audio, video, and discipline-specific resources.

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Teachers avail themselves of these opportunities to differing degrees, but pressure to cover everything in the curriculum means that time spent on supplementary rather than core materials is generally limited.

Students' opinions on whether the limited contact time should integrate new technologies were rather diverse, ranging along a continuum from 'online is state of the art' to 'the old ways are best':

Any use of technology in class increases variety, which in turn makes class more interesting and therefore eases the language learning process.

I like using technology in class, for example radio or TV, because you get used to listen to the language and learn to distinguish between accents.

However, technology is sometimes used just to keep students busy during class, which is not meaningful, since I can study that way on my own at home as well and do not have to go to class.

Technology is used better after class for the independent study, because in-class there should be more speaking, reading and listening instead of using technologies.

I don't really like a lot of technology in class because I think it is better to use it at home when I don't have a teacher who can explain things to me.

Clearly, the fact that students have such easy continuous access to all types of technology outside class strongly colours their views; this sample does not need the teacher to provide resources. However, it could be discerned that while some students were happy to look independently for online resources that would help with their studies, others would prefer the teacher to recommend and thus validate materials for out-of-class use.

Conclusion

The focus of this article has been on the personal learning environments of fairly advanced students. Yet, the shift from language learner to language user discussed earlier is clearly a global reality that affects classrooms regardless of specific context and level. Students have become 'digital residents living out at least part of their life with and through mobile devices' (Jarvis op.cit.: 24) in the L2. Choosing to address rather than ignore this changed reality may actually create more student-centred, relevant, and authentic classrooms as well as contribute to more deliberate and effective use of technology beyond the classroom setting.

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For instance, by asking students to find and share digital resources (news articles, forum comments, videos, etc.) that relate to content/topics on the curriculum, to post them on learning management systems or in closed Facebook groups, and to comment on the contributions of others, teachers would bridge informal and formal environments. Such an approach reflects the ‘sharing’ nature of Web 2.0, and lends itself well to classroom discussions on the topic being dealt with as well as on a meta level. Encouraging students to contribute resources that they find appropriate offers opportunities to foster indispensable digital literacy skills such as evaluation of resources concerning pertinence and credibility amongst less experienced learners. According to Jarvis (op.cit.), helping students to become more insightful and responsible digital residents—for example by devising tasks that require them to reflect on issues of security, plagiarism, and digital footprints—is one of the emergent new challenges facing the ELT profession.

Furthermore, as younger or lower-level learners may be less aware of the potential which their everyday digital activities offer for deliberate learning, they might benefit from having this link made explicit. Focusing class time on learner practices not only validates informal learning, but simultaneously presents opportunities to discuss listening/viewing/reading strategies and to address common misconceptions. With more experienced students sharing their know-how and teachers acting as ‘learning facilitators’ (Sockett op.cit.: 137), the convergence of virtual and real learning spaces can be promoted, and autonomous learning fostered.

To sum up, gaining insights into how students engage with technology might enable teachers to tap into the motivating potential of preferred technologies and assist learners in making more informed choices. Though it may not always be feasible to accommodate student preferences directly by integrating popular media such as video into the classroom, some simple measures represent valuable steps towards promoting optimal use of technology for language learning. These include discussing, validating, and encouraging informal language learning, raising awareness about the benefits of underused resources, exploring reasons for use and rejection, and fostering strategies to better exploit digital tools.

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