

Formal Language Teaching versus Informal Language Learning Supported by Mobile Devices

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Abstract

In our everyday practice as language teachers, we have often thought about the great gap between our in-classroom action (formal teaching) and our students' out-of-classroom linguistic attitudes, such as at home, with friends etc. (informal/non-formal learning). How many of their meaningful cognitive experiences really find a real correspondence in school life, either in style or in aim?

Nevertheless in the last decade, arising economic problems and uncertainties have caused increasing migration and the linguistic consequence is a need of new ways to support informal and non-formal language learning, that offer practical solutions for the improvement of linguistic diversity, where more formal learning is unable or less capable of doing.

This incoherence between method, means and aims (we think of the enlarged use of m-technology) leads to loss of motivation or/and lack of scholastic success, which often renders our work less effective.

Herewith I present a piece of research referring to what formal teaching and informal /non-formal learning mean and to the differences between the two, and then hypothesize as to how mobile-technology nowadays represents the most used informal unconscious language learning tool.

In order to fill the gap between out-of-classroom and in-classroom language learning activities, it is necessary that we change our point of view and bring mobile devices into the classroom, producing tasks that integrate and validate certain kinds of unconscious natural language learning activities actually supported by mobile-technology.

1. Introduction

I shall begin with an explanation of meanings, that are usually familiar, but which are also often confused, like: formal teaching and informal learning, their characteristics and their environments.

Then I would like to speak briefly about a possible meeting point between them: the use of Mobile Technologies and the focus on metacognition, and at the end I shall illustrate the advantages of implementing mobile devices instead of other technologies in formal language teaching activity, imagining possible scenarios for student tailored tasks.

This paper is aimed at teachers and researchers interested in understanding how formal teaching practice can be integrated with informal learning through the creative use of multimedia.

The use of students' own devices in the classroom and at home can be seen as an enrichment and simply as another way to learn, although apparently, unconscious and unstructured.

Teachers have to rethink their own teaching practice and develop new pedagogical scenarios and strategies, not only in order to renew their professional activity but also to give informal learning a chance to be recognized.

2. Formal teaching

What does formal teaching mean?

Formal, from 'form', means that the teaching action happens inside a structure, usually school.

A fixed place/places with a fixed timetable following fixed goals with various but not unlimited methods, supported by some but not unlimited means, and foreseeing evaluations and examinations.

That is to say this kind of action is structured, organized, intentional and is supposed to have as feedback a formal learning process, that is also conscious and intentional.

The problem is that learning processes happen not only if and when teachers want them.

Advantages of formal teaching are that teachers' professionalism, planning of actions, fixed goals and accreditations lead often to results.

Disadvantages are that students' learning times are not always the same as the requested times, that school activities are often meaningless for students and too far from students' real life.

Informal learning

What does informal learning mean?

Informal means that the learning process happens unconsciously, unintentionally, incidentally, naturally, anywhere at any time without any method, by various means, alone or in cooperation with others, often for pleasure.

The following is for example a definition of informal learning by the Commission of the European Communities.

'Informal 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 typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or "incidental"/random).

(Commission of the European Communities, 2001: 32-33)

3. Learning Environments

They are places or situations where students are involved and are learning, sometimes consciously like at school but often fully unconsciously like in the family.

A typical formal learning environment is the classroom and outside the classroom there are many other environments, real informal environments such as:

-bar, theatre, home, museum, playground etc.

But nowadays the most popular informal learning environments are virtual, like:

-blogs, social networks, forum, chats, etc.

"Virtual informal learning environments produce learners with new cognitive skills: strengths in iconic representation and spatial visualization but weaknesses in higher-order cognitive processes: abstract vocabulary, mindfulness, reflection, inductive problem solving, critical thinking, and imagination."(Greenfield : 2009)

4. Reflections on metacognition

Metacognition is the skill to become aware of how one learns and how one can manage better his/her learning process.

The strategies used at schools are usually implicit and the students need years to understand what their cognitive and psychological characteristics as learner are:

- how they process new words
- how they store them
- how they create mental maps
- how they manage images and sounds
- how they create links
- how they analyse texts
- how they can encourage themselves
- how they can low anxiety
- how they can overcome individual limitations in writing and speaking (let us only think of dislexya)
- how they cooperate with others
- how they plan their learning
- how they evaluate their results

and many others.

Teachers need new approaches to support autonomous but conscious ways of learning, promoting metacognitive strategies and filling the gap between formal and informal learning.

Integrating the new technologies, especially the mobile ones, in our everyday classroom-activity can help to develop the metacognitive routine and can be a better approach to the various students' learning styles and intelligence forms.

5. Mobile devices and their characteristics

Mobile devices like tablets and smartphones are becoming part of everyone's everyday life but not so often at school although they show interesting qualities: they are small, soft, easy to use, they can be equipped also with WI-FI, Bluetooth and GPS, capabilities that can allow connections to the Internet, which is often a problem at school.

Their operating system can run various types of application software, among them also educational apps, most are free or cheap; there are 'personal learning studios' that can become shared learning environments, avoiding the use of expensive books or photocopies.

The great chance offered by these pocket computers is

- to create new and innovative software which reflect the learner's needs and his learning style
- to personalise tasks
- but at the same time to promote collaborative learning
- to help students with learning disabilities or disorders
- to stimulate different intelligences (visual/spatial, musical, bodily/kinesthetic/, intrapersonal/interpersonal, verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical)
- to let students create new learning contents

6. Possible implementation of Mobile Technology in the classroom

In Italy Facebook is absolutely the most popular social networking site with a huge increase since 2008, in November 2010 the FB users amounted of 17.616.000 on a population of 60.000.000 , 93 % about 8.000.000 are teenagers and have a profile on it.

Italy is a country with a high number of mobiles, among them about 150% are smartphones.

Teachers can for example, on the one hand, survey students about what they usually do out of the classroom with their mobile devices, and then plan a task-based language activity, for example, using the text of an invitation to a created event on FB.

-students can analyze the length, the style, the punctuation, the use of nicknames, evaluate the impact, the aesthetic appeal, find grammatic or spelling errors etc.

-they can then expand the text, rewrite it in another form and reflect on the differences, discuss on language use, on new words, abbreviations etc.

7. Conclusions

I think that amazing scenarios with Mobile Technologies in and out of the classroom are yet to come, and we can now only imagine some of their uses.

I am also rather worried about Mobile Technology misuse, as is already happening in some schools.

This is a new opportunity for teachers to learn new approaches, to rethink their teaching activity, to profit from these new devices, to keep pace with everyday changing paradigms in developing knowledge and participating in it.

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