International Conference
ICT for Language Learning

Online Informal Learning of English: How Students Use Technology to Supplement Classes

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Abstract

Students form their own conceptions about how languages are learnt and which resources and environments are beneficial. Based on a recent survey amongst Austrian ESP students, this talk compares student perspectives on the potential of technology for different skills with evidence from research, explains some apparent inconsistencies in beliefs and practice, and suggests how user preferences in informal online learning and research outcomes might be exploited to benefit classroom practice as well as independent learning.

1. Background

In Austria, where the penetration of smartphones and high-speed internet is above European average, students have easy and cheap access to a wide array of technologies, employing them regularly for entertainment, personal communication and information seeking. Downloading services and streaming now make English-language films and TV series available in a country where 'regular' TV only shows dubbed versions; social media networks offer membership and interaction opportunities in international communities. With the proliferation of smartphones, tablets and netbooks, this means that students are increasingly exposed to English in informal settings.

Given that opportunities for incidental as well as deliberate practice of English have thus multiplied and far exceed what can be done in more formal environments, 'Online Informal Learning of English' (OILE) [1] clearly deserves more attention. Despite the sizeable literature on learner perceptions of specific digital resources in classroom settings, few studies have investigated the unscheduled, impromptu, out-of-class use of technologies. A review of journals in the field confirms that so far, the main emphasis of research has been on the outcomes of the application of technology in institutional contexts, with researchers and teachers interested in the effectiveness of digital resources mainly in terms of enhanced SLA or increased motivation.

Informal learning, by contrast, is not directly linked to any course or institution. It has been characterised as "Learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured […] and does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or 'incidental'/random)" [2].

Now that the normalisation of digital tools facilitates easy (and usually free) contact to authentic discourse in the target language, the question arises to what extent the distinction between intentional and incidental learning can be maintained. As Case asserts, the lines between language learning and language use are getting blurred when "language use *and* implicit learning are taking place through everyday communicative activities in virtual communities" [3].

In this study I am particularly interested in how students perceive the relationship between technology-facilitated language use and learning. When they write emails for work or watch movies for fun, update their profiles on Facebook or browse through reviews of places they would like to visit – are they aware of the positive side effects this may have on their language competence, and in particular, on specific skills and language areas? Conversely, do they employ media deliberately to improve their language skills?

2. Empirical study

I will present the more salient results of a study surveying students' experiences with a variety of digital applications, relating frequency of use and perceptions of usefulness in terms of their potential to develop a number of language skills and competencies. The questionnaire-based data provide a broad indication of how young adults – in this case, 175 Austrian business students with advanced English competence – practice informal learning and blend digital tools with more traditional resources. The data is interpreted through a combination of descriptive statistics and thematic analysis of open-response questions.

2.1 Results and discussion

One key challenge in the development of the survey instrument was to determine how fine-grained items could be without overloading students with long lists of technologies. Table 1 provides an overview of the technologies included in the final version of the questionnaire; some of them are 'discipline-specific', i.e. designed for *deliberate* language learning (e.g. online grammars), whilst others have entertainment or communication as primary focus (films, e-mail) and are thus the more typical *informal* learning resources.

	1 Technology has helped very much with L2 learning	**2 Rank 1, 2 or 3 for specific skill**	**3 Technology used daily or frequently by % of respondents**
Online dictionaries	74%	**V**, W	94%
TV/radio/video clips (traditional, downloaded, streamed...)	67%	**L**, **P**, S, CC	73%
Films etc. on DVD/ BluRay	60%	L, P, S	45%
Online news sites/journals	51%	**BE**, R	45%
E-books/books	41%		E-books 9% Books 35%
University-provisioned e-learning modules	38%	**G**, V, W BE	42%
E-mail	23%	**W**, R, G	43%
Written chat (e.g. Skype, Messenger)	23%		36%
Social networking sites (Facebook)	23%	**CC**	58%
Online grammars	22%	G	18%
Company or informational websites	18%	**R,** BE, V	Company websites 45% Informational websites 71%
Voice chat (e.g. Skype, Messenger)	15%	**S**, CC, L, P	14%
Text messages/SMS	9%		27%
Discussion forums	7%		12%
Language learning sites/courses (online/DVD)	7%		Online – 5% DVD - 1%
Blogs	7%		9%

Table 1. Ranking of perceived benefit of technologies for language learning (column 1); potential according to skill/domain (column 2; R=reading, W=writing, S=speaking, L= listening, CC=communicative competence, P=pronunciation, V=vocabulary, BE=Business English; rank 1=bolded) and frequency of use (column 3); n=175

As was to be expected, the results attest to regular online activity in English. Noteworthy among these results are first, the low rankings (columns 1&3) of discipline-specific applications (online grammars and language learning sites) which seems to indicate that for deliberate studying, more conventional material and social resources (books, teachers, native speakers) are preferred. Also blogs, which could provide ready access to specialist vocabulary in any area of interest to students, are used by less than 10% with regularity. Second, whilst books are considered beneficial resources, only about a third of respondents read books regularly; this could be construed as a sign of the reduced attention span and preference for hypertext the 'Net generation' has been accused of. E-books, despite their convenient vocabulary look-up options, are not prevalent at all. Third, some shifts in use are discernible even amongst emerging technologies: communication via social media sites (Facebook) is

replacing the 'older' technologies (Skype, MS Messenger). Similarly, peer-to-peer downloading, streaming and similar ways of obtaining visual media content has become a much more popular practice than watching DVDs. In this case, cost considerations seem to outweigh the additional linguistic benefits (subtitles) offered by many DVDs.

The top rankings of digital dictionaries, films and TV series in terms of utility and popularity mirror the results of some previous studies [4, 5, 6] surveying students' technology choices. The ready availability of English language TV series via the Internet is a relatively recent phenomenon and enjoys enthusiastic uptake, with about ¾ of the sample watching regularly online. Film in its different online guises is moreover considered the most useful medium for improving listening skills and pronunciation, and is even amongst the 3 best-ranked technologies for pronunciation and communicative competence. Viewing current series provides a rich learning experience akin to immersion, with plentiful examples of the kind of English students miss in their formal classes; i.e. an optimal form of incidental learning whilst enjoying an everyday pastime.

When asked to name the technology they preferred to use for intentional learning, again viewing films and series was mentioned most frequently. As the comments below (given verbatim) illustrate, respondents find it engaging, motivating and useful for various skills:

"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".

"Personally, I love watching films/series in English. It helps a lot to improve my language skills and makes fun!"

By contrast, the means for online communication fare significantly less well in students' estimate. Table 1 illustrates that written chat (unless via Facebook), texting and discussion forums play a very minor role in their personal learning environments. Facebook has gained rank 1 for communicative competence - yet this is the skill least well-catered for by technology, with only 2/3 agreeing to its potential. A significant finding is that voice chat, though considered potentially useful for 4 skills, is not prevalent (1/3 do not use it at all in English, only 14% regularly) – a striking contradiction given the sample's previously expressed aim to become 'fluent' speakers of English. The following reasons were extrapolated from free-response answers:

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 visioconferencing, i.e. 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 concern the missing cues of facial expressions and body language which students consider a vital aid towards understanding. Furthermore, students report getting distracted by other applications; the multi-functionality of networked/mobile devices represents a disadvantage here. Constant access to dictionaries "allows cheating". Overall, computer-mediated communication is experienced as less authentic and seen as inferior to face-to-face interaction.

2.2 Research evidence vs. student views

Written chat has not made it into the preferred technologies category for any skill. It is, however, a technology which has attracted much research interest, even before the ready availability of web 2.0 technologies, and quite a substantial literature attests to its benefits.

For instance, in a 2014 meta-level survey of effectiveness according to technology type, Golonka et al. found only limited evidence of measureable impact on learning outcomes in a review of over 350 studies. The exceptions were automatic speech recognition and chat. For the latter, there was strong support that the integration of chat enhanced both amount of language production and complexity, as well as moderate support for beneficial effects on output and interaction, affect and motivation, as well as feedback and metalinguistic knowledge [7].

Chat is thus one example of a technology with 'proven' credentials being underestimated by students. It would be interesting to explore the reasons in more detail. A 'pragmatic' explanation might be that students have moved their exchanges to a different tool (Facebook); a linguistic one that the very nature of informal quasi-synchronous online discourse means shorter turns and utterances which are structurally simple; a limited lexical range; and non-standard usages so that its learning potential is limited in the eyes of students. This is in contrast to asynchronous forms of interactive written discourse like email and online forums which facilitate "extended, fully developed, maximally explicit, and uninterrupted utterances" [8].

It seems that to achieve the positive impact on learning evidenced by the literature, it takes the initiative of teachers to integrate chat into learning in a structured form – i.e. by organising telecollaborations, tandem exchanges or in-class online discussions.

3. Conclusion

Exploring the applicability of technologies for specific language learning aims bottom-up rather than top-down may provide important insights for teachers. Finding out more about how students use the available media and juxtaposing their preferences/strategies with available research (e.g. on the effects of subtitling on the up-take of vocabulary) is a first step towards making classrooms more relevant and private learning environments more effective for learners.

The overall aim of this paper is to achieve a more detailed understanding of students' perceptions of the impact of a range of technologies on informal learning. While the focus is on personal learning environments, gaining insights into how students engage with technology might also help teachers to tap into the motivating potential of preferred technologies or help learners make more informed choices. Whilst it may not always be feasible to accommodate student preferences directly by integrating preferred media such as video into the classroom, 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 are valuable steps towards promoting optimal use of technology for language learning.

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