

Chapter 53

Informal Learning in Second Language Acquisition: A Case Study of Two ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter has investigated the importance of informal language learning in second language acquisition through a case study of two ESL learners. The effect of various kinds of informal learning with various resources on language proficiency and performance are discussed in relation to Bennett's model (2012). The case study shows that an "intake-type" informal environment can provide input to the language acquisition and self-directed learning and is crucial to effective language learning. Through the interviews with the subject learners, it can be seen that the learner with higher English proficiency and performance has been using self-directed language learning throughout his childhood and youth whereas the learner with lower English proficiency and performance generally has adopted tacit learning, which seems to be less effective in informal learning. Hence, self-directed learning should be promoted in schools and colleges by raising students' awareness of its importance and promoting learning-to-learn strategies.

INTRODUCTION

English being a global language has gained a significant and essential position in Hong Kong education for decades. Before 1997, English was the formal medium of instruction in schools; however, Cantonese, being the mother-tongue of Hong Kong people, has been adopted as the medium of instruction in most of the schools after the handover of Hong Kong to China after 1997. Since then, Hong Kong students have been blamed for declining standard of English, yet they were trying hard to learn and improve English indifferent modes of learning including formal education and non-formal education such as attending tutorial classes, language enhancement workshops/activities, and informal education like watching television, reading newspapers, listening to music, reading books, and so on.

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Some research suggests that informal learning should complement formal learning (Bell, 1977; Bell & Dale, 1999; Bruce, 1997). A study by Bell and Dale (1999) suggests that informal learning by itself could not provide the desired learning outcomes, but a combination of formal and informal learning would be a better approach. Bruce (1997) comments that the Teaching Firm project developed by the Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) of Massachusetts, suggests informal learning should also complement formal learning. Therefore, informal learning has been gaining increasing attention to increase competence in the workplace and foster lifelong learning (Dettori & Torsani, 2013). Cross (2009) suggests that “Informal learning is the unofficial, unscheduled, impromptu way most people learn to do their jobs. Informal learning is like riding a bicycle: the rider chooses the destination and the route. The cyclist can take a detour at a moment’s notice to admire the scenery or help a fellow rider.” Some researchers have found that learners benefit from opportunities to use the second language outside the classroom, but some found that learners with greater out-of-classroom contact with the target language are not as proficient as those who don’t (Spada, 1985). For example, Mason (1971) discovered in his study that no significant difference in English proficiency is found between those freed from ESL classes and those controls who took the required ESL classes.

Although there are inconclusive findings in the effectiveness of informal learning, both formal and informal linguistic environments contribute to second language proficiency in different ways. According to Krashen (1976), “an intensive intake informal environment can provide both the adult and child with the necessary input for the operation of the language acquisition device. The classroom can contribute in two ways: As a formal linguistic environment, providing rule isolation and feedback for the development of the monitor, and, to the extent language use is emphasized, simultaneously as a source of primary linguistic data for language acquisition (p.167).”

With the prevalent use of technology in learning, learning structures are re-defined and re-shaped by the contributing learners because they nowadays often rely on online resources, mobile tools, and social applications for learning (Johnson, Pasquini & Rodems, 2012). Several studies (Bartlett-Brag, 2008; Breuer et al., 2007; Eshach, 2007; Hodgkinson et al., 2003; Lucas & Moreira, 2009; Pettenati & Ranieri, 2006) have reported that learners mostly “rely on social approaches and web technologies, targeted at creating opportunities for informal learning and connecting them with formal education” (Dettori & Torsani, 2013, p.93). Most educators and trainers nowadays have also seen learners carrying their smart phones to send emails, browse websites and text instantly, and people alluded to various forms of technologies including Wikipedia, blogs, and Web searching tools (Bonk, 2009).

In order to understand the current trend of informal language learning, this chapter studies two Chinese learners’ informal approaches to English language learning. It focuses on their experience and motivation in informal English learning and its relationship with their language proficiency. The effect of their informal learning with various resources including both digital and non-networked resources on language proficiency and performance is discussed with Bennett’s model (2012) as well. The results show that the learner with higher English proficiency and performance has adopted self-directed learning which is considered to be conscious and intentional learning whereas the learner with lower English proficiency and performance tends to be tacit. Hence, it is suggested that the informal linguistic environment can be beneficial to ESL learners, and self-directed learning is comparatively preferable for second language acquisition when the learner is a motivated one.

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