Chapter 82

An Investigation Into Chinese College English Teachers' Beliefs of Students' Web–Based Informal Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of information and technology, language learners have more ways to acquire the target language. Recently, WILL has gained popularity, for informal web-based learning of English has been depicted as a process driven by the purpose of communication. Thus, teachers have many challenges when teaching learners who have experienced informal online language learning. Therefore, teachers may change their teaching strategies in order to achieve their teaching effectiveness. The present study investigated 30 Chinese in-service college English teachers' beliefs of WILL in order to provide for teachers the insight into the current consciousness language teachers should have of these practices.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information technology has provided language learners with more easy ways to acquire what they want, such as mobile learning, informal online learning, ect.(Fawzi, 2014; Gupta & Koo, 2010; Kim, Ruecker & Seo, 2013; Yu & Chang, 2014) Recently, Web-based Informal Language Learning(WILL) or Informal Online Language Learning(IOLL) has gained popularity, for informal web-based learning of English has been depicted as a process driven by the purpose of communication, due to the fact that language learning is merely a by-product of such kind of communication (Sockett, 2011). And many researchers have been devoted to informal web-based language learning to identify learners' language development via online activities like blogging, social networking, chatting, downloading television series or films, e-mailing, participating in online forums, listening to English music and browsing English webs. (Ieda & Nagla, 2012; Paulline, Jared & Cynthia, 2012)

Studies on WILL attempt to get an understanding of the mechanisms running outside instructed learning and online, because the available and accessible online learning materials have greatly changed learners' learning habits in the 21st century. Consequently, teachers may have a many challenges when teaching learners who have experienced informal online language learning, which include learners' individual differences in primary knowledge of the target language, their unexpected changes in language skills and learning intention, etc. As a result, teachers may change their teaching strategies in order to achieve their teaching effectiveness.

Therefore, the present study is to investigate Chinese college English teachers' beliefs of WILL in order to provide for teachers the insight into the current consciousness language teachers should have of these practices, since large quantities of studies have indicated that a considerable number of language learners spend much more time on informal English learning than they do in the classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As defined by Benson (2001), Web-based Informal English Learning (WIEL) is a certain sub-group of language learning out of class, which focuses specifically on the informal and web-based components of out-of-class language learning. It is closely related with "self-regulated out-of-class language learning with technology" (Lai & Gu 2011: 317). Another distinctive feature of WIEL is its incidental rather than deliberate nature, that is, the purpose of learners' learning activities is primarily for entertainment, getting information, etc. in addition to language acquisition (Toffoli & Sockett, 2010), whereas learners' out-of class language learning has deliberate intentions to improve their English (Benson, 2006; Larsen & Cameron, 2007). Meanwhile, learners' learning activities undoubtedly influence their acquisition of the target language. (Krashen & Terrell, 1983)

Toffoli and Sockett's (2010) made a survey of 222 French non-English majors practicing informal learning of English. They found that the most prevailing learning activities among these students' are listening to English music accompanied by lyrics and watching American series. What's more, these students have more English listening practice than reading practice and they are actively involved in interactive online writing, such as participating in forum discussions, sending English instant messages or e-mails and so on.

In order to further understand these practices, Sockett and Toffoli (2012) studied six English learners' registration books of their daily activities over a period of eight weeks. They found that the average duration of these six students' online activities in English is about five hours every week, during which students are involved in activities, like watching TV series and listening to music, for leisure and amusement as well as different pragmatic intentions, for instance, seeking online suggestions, providing online tutoring or interpreting online content. Based on the above findings, they claim that these students should be viewed as not just learners but language users, for being language learners, students are always confined to classroom contact with English and teacher-orientated assignments.

However, informal language learning appears to go beyond "natural approach" put forward by Krashen because WILL not only has the potential of extensive comprehensible input, but also stimulates meaningful output, that is, learners' being involved in abundant interactions by using the target language (Hubbard & Levy, 2006; O'Malley & Chamot, 2009; Swain, 2005). For example, students not only watch an online English-language television series, but also write in interactive contexts, or practice

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