

INFORMAL LEARNING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES WITH WEB 2.0

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Received:	01/3/2021	While learning a new language is often associated with the activities taking place in the classroom with the participation of instructors and learners, it is the real life setting that enables learning to occur in its most natural and fundamental form. Due to current technological renovations, the concept of informal language learning has been altered and new perspectives about this language type have been established. This paper focuses on the use of Web 2.0, one of the latest digital technologies, as an informal learning platform. By researching the given literature and empirical studies published since 2004 in the field, we present several issues on informal learning of foreign languages with Web 2.0 applications. The findings indicate that Web 2.0 has changed the approach, tools, language form and learners' perceptions about informal language learning. Also, it has been found that this learning setting benefits language learners because it is participatory, flexible and more relaxing besides offering learners' two – way involvement. Nonetheless, users must be confronted with feedback, safety and digital skill concerns. The findings of this study are hoped to offer an insight into informal language learning and maximize the potential of this setting for language acquisition.
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HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ NGOÀI LỚP HỌC VỚI WEB 2.0

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	01/3/2021	Khi nhắc đến việc học một ngôn ngữ mới, chúng ta thường nghĩ đến hoạt động dạy và học ngôn ngữ trong môi trường lớp học. Tuy nhiên, chính cuộc sống thực tế bên ngoài trường lớp mới là môi trường học tập ngôn ngữ tự nhiên và cơ bản nhất. Hiện tại, sự phát triển của công nghệ đã dẫn đến những thay đổi trong cách nhìn nhận về hình thức học tập này. Bài viết của chúng tôi tập trung vào một trong những ứng dụng công nghệ mới nhất - Web 2.0 - như một phương tiện học tập ngoại ngữ bên ngoài trường lớp. Thông qua tổng hợp các lý thuyết và nghiên cứu có liên quan từ năm 2004 trở lại đây, chúng tôi đã tóm lược một số vấn đề về học ngoại ngữ ngoài lớp học với các ứng dụng Web 2.0. Trước hết, Web 2.0 có ảnh hưởng đến đường hướng, phương thức, hình thức ngôn ngữ và nhận thức của người học về học tập ngoại ngữ ngoài lớp học. Bên cạnh đó, học ngoại ngữ với Web 2.0 mang lại những lợi ích đáng kể bởi hình thức này mang tính cộng tác, linh hoạt, không áp lực, giúp người học vừa tiếp nhận vừa sử dụng ngôn ngữ. Tuy nhiên, người học với Web 2.0 cũng phải đối mặt với những vấn đề liên quan đến phản hồi, an toàn khi sử dụng mạng và yêu cầu về kỹ năng số. Chúng tôi hy vọng rằng kết quả từ nghiên cứu sẽ góp phần mang lại cái nhìn toàn diện về hình thức học ngoại ngữ bên ngoài lớp học, giúp tối đa hóa tiềm năng của hình thức học tập này.
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1. Introduction

Out – of – school environment is clearly home to much language learning [1]. It is a well – founded belief that language learners should be exposed to the target language to increase their proficiency. This exposure is particularly necessary for those whose contexts are not prevailed by the target language. However, the fact appears that the concept of learning and teaching a foreign language is almost confined to schools. This has been reflected by ample efforts to improve formal language teaching situations and considerable research devoted to solve the problems in these classes. Also, further concerns on learning foreign languages outside the formal educational system are just limited to language centres, professional associations, government agencies or socio-economic organizations, which are regarded as non-formal education system [2]. It can be seen that the role of informal settings, which refer to learning a foreign language naturally from daily lives, is seemingly downplayed in the practice and literature of language learning [3], [4].

Meanwhile, the modern society accompanied with advanced communication technology and global integration have generated abundant forms of informal language learning. Obviously, learning a foreign language from daily lives is no longer concerned exclusively with reading newspaper, watching films or listening to songs in the target language. In the era of Web 2.0, learners are provided with authentic language immersion and have a chance to participate in interactive practice of various language skills [5]. Thus, Web 2.0 tools are considered a rich out – of – class source for language learners to enhance their language proficiency.

The enormous potential of acquiring a new language from Web 2.0 tools has challenged the scant existing literature on beyond – classroom language learning. Also, what have been done with the use of Web 2.0 as an informal learning platform has primarily focused on exploring individual Web 2.0 applications. Therefore, it is of importance to have a comprehensive look into informal language learning with these tools so as to exploit this learning setting to the full. In this paper, we selected theoretical and empirical studies published since 2004 for review because it is widely accepted that the notion of Web 2.0 dates back to a conference brainstorming session that year [6]. Researching these studies, our review aims at answering the following research questions:

- (1) How have Web 2.0 tools affected the informal learning of foreign languages?
- (2) What are benefits of Web 2.0 tools on the informal learning of foreign languages?
- (3) What are challenges posed by Web 2.0 for the informal learning of foreign languages?

2. Theorizing informal language learning

The term “informal” education was coined and popularized by Knowles in the 1950s to indicate the learning programs independent of formal schooling systems [7]. However, the issue of terminology has been always a matter for debate. Defining the informal context for language is a conceptual difficulty for a couple of reasons. First, learning itself cannot be expounded with a single description and totally shared set of rules. Second, as a social phenomenon, language creeps into every corner of our lives, which blurs the boundaries among language learning landscapes. To address these issues, Benson and Reinders’ four – dimension framework to qualify what is termed “language learning beyond the classroom” should be referred as a way to start. The four dimensions include *location* (where and when the learning occurs), *formality* (the extent to which learning is connected with educational qualifications or guided by educational institutions), *pedagogy* (the degree to which teachers’ instruction is involved); and *locus of control* (how learners decide their learning) [8].

In terms of location, informal language learning mostly takes place out of class when learners are exposed to the target language at home, at work or in social interaction. By contrast, formal learning language is witnessed in the class environment where the target language is taught to a group of learners [9]. However, this is not to say that informal and other forms of language learning can be distinguished on the sole basis of physical location. Informal language learning

can be practiced in classrooms when the focus of learning is not on the language itself, but on the meaning. That leads to another significant criterion in Benson and Reinders' framework, formality. While formal language learning is stated to be structured, purposeful and school – based with an accredited curriculum or program [10], [11], informal language learning is considered the most spontaneous one, characterized by its nature of being unstructured and unpurposeful, but the most extensive and authentic [7], [11]. Besides, certification, such as certificates, degrees and diplomas, which defines formal learning is not the absolute aim of informal language learning [8], [10].

Pedagogy is essential to identify what can be classified as informal language learning. The notion of pedagogy consists of methods of instructions, structured progression of learning materials, forms of explanation and assessment activities [12]. Compared to other language settings, informal language learning is self – instructed, which means it happens without teachers' involvement. Finally, locus of control, referring to how learners direct their own learning, plays a part to highlight the differences among language learning forms. Regarding locus of control, informal language learning is autonomous, self - regulated and independent with very little interference of the others whereas formal learning is largely directed by teachers and formal educational authorities [8].

Benson and Reinders [13] claim that this basic framework is of help for analyzing a particular activity of language learning beyond the classroom, but it is still “rudimentary” and needs more development. One of their noticeable additions to the framework is intentionality, derived from DeKeyser's idea [14]. The dimension of intentionality clarifies whether the learning is intentional with strong emphasis on the target language or incidental when language learning is simply a by – product [13]. Furthermore, Ellis's criterion of awareness, referring to whether the learning is explicit or implicit, is amended to the model as well [15]. With this view, informal language learning might be incidental with a great deal of concentration on meaning, and implicit as learners may not be consciously aware of it [15].

Benson and Reinders' updated model is believed to be helpful to differentiate informal language learning with other language learning settings. It is generally accepted that the words to imply the core features of informal language learning might include out – of – class, unstructured, self – instructed, autonomous, incidental and unintentional.

3. Web 2.0 and informal learning of foreign languages

Introduced in 2004, the term Web 2.0 refers to the second generation of the world wide web, which offers an extensive range of web – based services involving users' creation and modification [16]. Schrum and Levin [17] state that Web 2.0 are attributed as production, creativity, information sharing, and collaboration. Similarly, as summarized by Kuznetsova and Soomro, Web 2.0 tools are read – write, bi – directional, dynamic, and participatory [18]. While Web 1.0 is often considered “read – only web” which provides static information, Web 2.0 offers users access to the dynamic content that is not only read and listened to but also generated and contributed by users. Additionally, Web 2.0 is characterized by bi – directional interactions because both site creators and web users can enjoy two – way conversations, for example by simply leaving a comment on the site. Unlike the top – down delivery of data in Web 1.0, Web 2.0 encourages the participatory approach to information, indicated by the fact that even ordinary users can create, share and interact with the web content. Web 2.0 is considered an innovative step in the digital age and an effective language learning tool since it enables learners to get exposure to authentic sources of the target language with their both receptive and productive skills. The widespread emergence of web 2.0 technology has affected the informal environment for learning foreign languages in noticeable ways, both positively and negatively.

3.1. Influences of Web 2.0 tools on informal foreign language learning settings

For years, informal learning has been underestimated and regarded as invalid for acquiring second or foreign languages. However, the digital age is changing this situation gradually. Regarding language acquisition, recent technologies have had an effect on the approaches that pave the way for informal language learning. In the early days of computer assisted language learning (CALL), language learners were supposed to perform a number of repetitions and drills with computers to enhance their language acquisition, which signals the behaviorist theory of learning. This appears to be controversially contrary to the traits of informal language learning that emphasizes the extensive and spontaneous language caches [7]. Recently, cutting – edge technologies integrated with increasingly interactive features have suggested that informal language learning can be based on other language theories like constructivist [7]. From the constructivist perspective, learning should be associated with learner’s personal involvement in the construction of knowledge and they can have their own understanding through their own activity or exploration [19]. That is a match with Web 2.0 informal language learning as the web technology learners to largely exposed to authentic language input in a real life context. Besides constructivism, other researchers opt to sociocultural approach, learning autonomy, collaborative learning or situated learning as the theoretical underpinnings for informal language learning practices [20].

Moreover, since the introduction of Web 2.0 tools, foreign language learners have had more options to come into contact with the target language directly and informally. Considering the educational potential, Crook et al listed twelve categories of Web 2.0 activity in their 2008 research report, namely media sharing, media manipulation, conversational arenas, online games and virtual worlds, social networking, blogging, social bookmarking, recommender systems, collaborative editing, wikis, and syndication [19]. This classification is relatively simple as it does not include subcategories and, like other initial typologies, is not based upon a clearly articulated rationale [21]. Thanks to technological advances, there has been an increasing number of out – of – class learning forms along with more interest in grouping them [10]. In 2015, Bower’s educational Web 2.0 typology, including 37 types arranged into 14 clusters, was derived on the basis of development of Web 2.0 dimensions, grouping cases according to observed regularities, and construction of types depending on meaningful relationships [21]. Nonetheless, with regard to radical changes in the technological landscape within the next five years, the researchers have offered an update to this typology because some tools have become unavailable and some others entered the Web 2.0 setting [22]. The updated typology of web-based learning technologies present a list of 40 types, divided into 15 clusters.

The emerging Web 2.0 tools also results in the shift in learners’ preferences and educators’ research interests. While blogs and wikis were the most popular and studied tools for second language learning between 2005 and 2010 [6], the recent studies about individual Web 2.0 tools seem to predominantly focus on video streaming and social networking sites, typically Facebook and Twitter. If a more feasible Web 2.0 tool is developed in the future, there is no doubt that it will be likely to substitute for the current ones to become the prominent choice of language learners and the concern of researchers. For instance, one growing trend in informal language learning these days deals with gaming. The literature of informal language learning recognizes the relationship between gaming and foreign language acquisition, stating that gameplay practices are a promising environment for the development of informal learning [4]. It can be predicted that more emerging Web 2.0 tools will be dealt with in educational research in the future.

Another point to consider is that audiovisual technologies remain their continuing importance in informal language learning settings. These technologies are particularly associated with a rising form of language labelled as “recreational language learning”, in which language learners

access their target language for entertainment and socialization, not for explicit purpose of learning [23]. Recreational language learning is not just limited to entertainment activities but extends to other types of recreational interactions. For example, language learning can take place through fan practices such as participating fandoms, designing fan websites, online debating, spoiling, and fan subbing [24].

Finally, learners' perception about informal language learning is thought to experience considerable changes. Although unintentionality is often considered an indicator of informal language learning, some researchers have questioned about the importance of intentional aspect of informal learning in the digital context. Trinder [25] reports that a number of learners deliberately get involved in informal learning activities and that the benefits of informal language learning do not really go unnoticed. In the other words, language learners are aware that they can improve their language proficiency while using these Internet tools in their daily life.

3.2. Benefits of Web 2.0 tools on informal learning of foreign languages

A very clear advantage of Web 2.0 on foreign language learning over Web 1.0 is its users' upgraded status. Web 2.0 interfaces offers what is termed by O'Reilly "the network effect" and an "architecture of participation" [26]. The network effect means web practices are contingent over a large number of users [17], [26], enlarging their social and professional circles. Meanwhile, the Internet users are no longer the passive consumers of static information; instead, they become creators and contributors of online content [26]. This collaborative feature of Web 2.0 is particularly meaningful to language learning because it triggers learners' active engagement and benefits their language skills. As reported by Hamat and Hassan [27], a large number of Malaysian university students perceive social networking services as helpful means for their informal language learning, especially in their writing, reading, communication and vocabulary enhancement.

Furthermore, Web 2.0 is regarded a proper language learning setting since it provides users with opportunities to obtain accessible input and perform their language use. On the one hand, the web technology offers great authentic language sources, which language learners not only absorb but also interact with [16], [28]. Learners can observe and listen to how native speakers express their ideas, making room for natural immersion in the target language. On the other hand, learners can practice different language skills via various cyber activities, like talking with foreigners, leaving comments on social networking sites, discussing in fandoms or writing fan fiction.

In addition to language proficiency, Web 2.0 services play a role in fostering users' cultural competence. It is suggested that the technology can provide access to cultural input in an efficient way [18], through users' observation and exploration of cultural practices, for instance. Moreover, they can exchange cultural understandings directly or draw their own conclusions of culturally accepted behaviors via participating real intercultural communication. That will help to make these users successful global citizens who can communicate effectively with the others around the world.

Another positive side of informal language learning with Web 2.0 is flexibility, resulting from the greater availability of mobile devices. Their portability and ubiquity has allowed the extension of learning venues to learners' daily lives, creating "seamless learning space" [20]. Learners are not necessarily at home with their desktop computers to browse webs because their mobile phones or tablets can help them to stay connected anywhere. Hence, Web 2.0 tools contributes to strengthening users' lifelong learning by enabling them to get constant real – life contact with the target language [29].

Interestingly, Web 2.0 tools for informal language learning are believed to support learners emotionally. Take social networks as an example. Alm [28] claims that Facebook and other social networking sites in general establish a casual and relaxing setting for learners to speak out.

Thanks to this intimate environment, they do not face as much pressure to use language as they do in classes. One possible justification is that users do not care much about making mistakes as they concentrate on communicating their ideas. Additionally, learners can produce the target language on their own choices of time, place, topics, and modes rather than under teachers' assignment, so they can develop their sense of ownership and be more autonomous. That is typically important for timid learners because they will feel more confident to work with the language they are learning [28].

3.3. Challenges of Web 2.0 tools on informal learning of foreign languages

Previously, researchers often cited insufficient technological support as the primary problem for language learners [29], [30]. Nevertheless, the exponential growth of technology ecology has made the technological barriers less intense. Current language learners are coping with other rising matters rather than simply lack of appropriate devices or limited Internet connection.

The first problem is related to quality feedback. It is concluded that three attributes of an ideal language learning setting are comprehensible and rich language input, chances for output and practice, and reliable feedback [31]. With built – in sharing and participatory features, informal language learning with Web 2.0 tools clearly represents the two former characteristics of an effective learning environment. However, users cannot receive proper feedback from these tools like they often do in formal educational contexts. The reason is that they focus on communicative meaning rather than form of the target language. The unsatisfactory amount of high-quality feedback can lead to mechanical errors in learners' language use that are hard to correct.

Online safety among language learners, especially youngsters, is another cause of concern. It cannot be denied that the young are at an increased risk when going online [26]. They might get involved in or suffer from privacy leakages, cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate media, or other dangerous activities. These online risks can stem from factors such as lack of parental monitoring and users' self – control, careless uses of the Internet, and availability of harmful web content. To address these matters, besides service providers' regulations, like game age and content ratings, and adults' control, younger learners should learn how to be self – disciplined and stay safe on the Internet.

The other tension for informal language learning with Web 2.0 is the increased requirement of digital skills and competence [19], [30]. Technology is advancing at a rapid pace and mastering it is not simple. Many Internet users may miss the chance to learn informally and comfortably just because they do not know how to utilize what is available in their devices. The disparity in digital skills can be seen when it comes to age groups: young users are often better at digital practices than older ones [30].

4. Conclusions

In short, with the new digital technologies, informal language learning has experienced significant changes. This learning setting has been addressed in other approaches, witnessed in more forms, and acknowledged differently by learners. Informal learning settings with Web 2.0 tools can be advantageous for language learners in considerable ways due to their collaboration feature, provision of language input and output practice opportunities, possibility of cultural enrichment, flexibility and emotional support. Yet we need to take account of the challenging factors of this learning setting, including those related to feedback, e-safety and digital matters.

Given the growth of modern technologies and their potential for foreign language learning beyond classrooms, more attention should be paid to informal language learning in digital contexts. It is worthy for researchers and educators to exploit the potential values of the Web 2.0 practices, minimize their downsides and catch up with the current technological trends to facilitate learners effectively.

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