Chapter 1

Informal language Practices via Digital Technology: The Neglected Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

The main contention of this chapter is to dig into ICT-based serendipitous activities that second language (L2) learners perform beyond formal curriculum. It is based on an idea that juxtaposition of formal and informal language learning, under the auspices of ICT, broadens the ecology of learning and thus contributes to learners’ overall proficiency. Nevertheless, formal language learning continues to be disconnected from practices that take place outside the classroom in hyperspaces, and the language uptake obtained from informal electronic involvement generally goes unnoticed. The chapter undertakes this missing proficiency and suggests implications to bridge or at least narrow the gap between formal and informal learning. It familiarizes teachers, parents, and course designers with today’s learners’ experiences of learning that occur after structured lessons. It implies that informal ICT-enabled practices should be fostered as supplementary and complementary to the formal instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Digital technology, which has become mainstream in modern life, has enlivened foreign language learning, making it cross barriers of the classroom and intertwine with informal learning. It has given language learners various and intriguing ways...
to acquire the target language in ways never attained before the emergence of sophisticated gadgets such as laptops, tablets, mobile phones, iPod, and an array of Web-based tools and applications. A large percentage of today’s learners spend most of their lives connected to such electronic devices (Godwin-Jones, 2019; Ibrahim, 2018; Jarvis, 2014). The current generation of technology users, or as Jarvis dubbed the ‘digital residents,’ seem to digitize most aspects of their life, including second language (L2) learning. Since students’ lives are permeated by a wide range of timely resources of information and communication technology (ICT), these ‘digital residents’ spend part of their lives performing ICT-based activities (Jarvis, 2014). They reside in cyberspace beyond formal learning contexts. Technology has saturated their lives and become a part of who and what they are (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Lee & Kim, 2014). Travis and Joseph (2009) noted that ICT empowers language learners to partake in virtual communication outside of class time; it has led to a diminution in their participation in formal education (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Arguably, the availability and diversity of such ICTs individualize practices – allowing users to manage learning activities by choosing the materials, time, and places of their study (Hegelheimer & O’Bryan, 2009). That is, the digital technology breakthroughs have spawned new opportunities of self-directing learning; learners self-monitor their learning, independently from the confinements of formal teaching (Bonk & Lee, 2017; Godwin-Jones, 2019; Lai, 2017).

Nevertheless, some researchers contend that the availability of ICTs does not mean that learners always embrace these learning opportunities. Carrying hand-held devices does not ensure that each of these technologies is used to the best effect (Levy, 2009). For instance, YouTube and Facebook which have matured into common sources for educational content are still a topic of controversy. Jarvis (2014) found that the participants in his study used ICT not to practice English explicitly but to perform free activities such as posting on Facebook, commenting on other users’ posting or status and watching videos on YouTube. Similarly, Isbell (2018) found that there is little recognition of language learning activities in online spaces where language is the primary focus. The author argued that surfing the Internet for a general learning purpose does not automatically amount to what Krashen (2009) termed ‘comprehensible input’. In the same vein, Lee (2019) alleged that L2 vocabulary development does not stem from simply placing learning in a technology-rich learning environment. It is in this spirit of query, the chapter considers the wider ‘ecology’ of learning, looking beyond what formal education offers. It hones in on the content of L2 learners’ indulgence in electronic consumption and the relevance of this engagement to their English performance.
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