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RESEARCH IN THE NEWS

BAAL/CUP 2017–2018 Seminar

(In)Formal L2 learning: Integrating informal practices into formal contexts

Henriette L. Arndt[1]* and Christina Lyrigkou[2]

[1]University of Oxford, UK and [2]Open University, UK
*Corresponding author. Email: henriette.arndt@education.ox.ac.uk

The seminar, held at the University of Oxford, Department of Education, 23 and 24 August 2018, organised by Henriette L. Arndt from the University of Oxford and Christina Lyrigkou from the Open University, brought together researchers and education practitioners from across Europe (and beyond) to engage in collaborative dialogue about the emergent, innovative field of informal L2 learning (ISLL). The central topic for discussion was whether, and how, insights from ISLL research could be applied to formal language learning and teaching.

Altogether, there were 45 seminar participants including graduate students, researchers, e-learning professionals, teachers, and teacher educators from institutions around the UK[1] and ten other countries.[2] The programme featured four keynote speeches, delivered by researchers who are experts in the field of ISLL, as well as an interactive workshop, poster presentations, a panel discussion, and breakout discussion groups.

Day 1–23 August 2018

The first keynote speaker, Geoffrey Sockett (Paris Descartes University, France) gave a broad introduction to the seminar topic, informal L2 learning (which he calls 'online informal learning of English' [OILE]). Drawing on this own research and that of others, Professor Sockett gave an overview of what is known about ISLL so far and discussed what he regards as the fundamental questions to be addressed in the near future. Turning his eye to the seminar's central question, Professor Sockett concluded his talk by looking at examples of online courses he has helped develop, which seek to bridge the gap between students' formal and informal language learning worlds.

This keynote was followed by a workshop led by Jason Cole, an e-learning entrepreneur and early-career researcher. Dr Cole led the participants through four workshop activities: in the first activity, attendees were asked to discuss informal learning from the learner's perspective, identifying different types of learners and ways in which they might use informal sources. In activities two and three, the discussion shifted to the teacher's perspective: whether and how informal sources can be integrated in the traditional English as a foreign language classroom and what the possible challenges are. Attendees designed authentic classroom activities in which, as potential teachers of an imaginary class, they would introduce a lexical or grammatical feature through the use of informal sources. The fourth and final activity required the attendees to brainstorm relevant research questions for future studies that could address the challenges associated with integrating informal practices into formal settings.

The first day of the seminar was concluded with the second keynote speech, given by early-career researcher Meryl Kusyk (Karlsruhe University of Education, Germany). Dr Kusyk reported on the outcome of her recent doctoral research project on informal learning of English among university students in Germany and France. The study took a mixed-methods approach, analysing questionnaire data from a large sample of students in both countries as well as longitudinal L2 development data from two individual case studies. The case study results were the primary focus of the presentation:

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Dr Kusyk demonstrated that linguistic development in her participants was highly unique and variable and likely related to the way in which each participant constructed his/her own authentic and unique informal language user profile. The conclusion of this talk focused on theoretical and methodological issues relevant for ISLL researchers, particularly in reference to interpreting high variability data from a COMPLEX DYNAMIC SYSTEMS theoretical viewpoint.

Day 2–24 August 2018

In the third keynote speech, Liss Kerstin Sylvén (University of Gothenburg, Sweden) gave an introduction to her work on 'Extramural English' (EE), situating it in the field of ISLL. Professor Sylvén reviewed past EE research from both the Swedish context and other European countries, giving examples of extramural activities and their effects on learners' written production, receptive vocabulary and school grades. She also reported on her recent studies that focus on very young learners of English (ages five to ten) in Sweden and their extramural activities, which comprise, for example, TV viewing and watching videos on YouTube. Although the young learners had undergone little or no prior formal English teaching, they demonstrated significant proficiency, both in terms of vocabulary and spoken performance. Professor Sylvén concluded that EE can be a major source for English learning, but that teachers' constrained views on the content and effects of learners' individual practices can pose limitations in the integration of such activities into the classroom.

The morning keynote was followed by a two-hour session for poster presentations, wherein 15 delegates – mostly graduate students and early-career researchers – introduced their ongoing research projects. The presentations showcased the vast variety of research opportunities that are present in a field as new and as vibrant as ISLL, and the range of methodological approaches bore testament to the creativity with which challenges in researching beyond-the-classroom learning can be overcome. The posters effectively facilitated lively discussions among all delegates, particularly regarding the current key questions and future directions in ISLL research.

The fourth keynote speaker, Huw Jarvis, founder and editor of www.TESOLacademic.org, began his talk with a historical overview of research on the role technology in L2 learning, starting from the early stages of traditional computer assisted language learning (CALL) and mobile assisted language learning (MALL) research towards a new era of mobile assistedlanguage use (MALU) and digital L2 immersion. After a review of past research into CALL/MALL and the emergent field of MALU, Jarvis talked about some implications for practice, comparing a stereotypical computer- or mobile assisted 'presentation, practice, production' lesson to a task-based language teaching lesson, designed with MALU in mind. The talk concluded with a call for action to the present practitioners and researchers, to work together to create a model for integrating informal learning into the classroom.

The final keynote speech was followed by a panel discussion. The panel was made up of the four keynote speakers, who were joined by Robert Woore and Laura Molway, two modern foreign language teacher educators from the Oxford University Department of Education. Of the questions discussed — some were related to ISLL research practices, such as the central questions on which informal learning researchers should focus at the moment and how researchers can make their work more applicable to classroom learning. Questions were also raised with regard to the pedagogy of language teaching and the practical aspects that teachers need to consider when seeking integrating informal practices into their classrooms. As had been the case during the previous keynote speeches, another point that was raised frequently was whether teachers SHOULD try to integrate informal practices in the classroom and whether ISLL researchers SHOULD strive to design their studies with classroom applicability in mind, or whether formal and informal learning should remain more theoretically and practically separated. While no consensus was reached on this issue, the panellists seemed to agree that research on learners' informal practices is of value to teachers and other practitioners, not least because it can help them understand their students' motivation for and approaches to language learning and use.

The final part of the two-day programme consisted of some time for break-out discussion groups, to give the delegates a chance to explore and discuss their own stances on the questions that had been

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raised in the panel discussion. The attendees were divided into three discussion groups, moderated by Henriette L. Arndt, Christina Lyrigkou, and Robert Woore. The groups dealt with some of the questions addressed in the panel discussion, as well as new questions that had emerged. Attendees had the opportunity to draw on their own experiences as teachers, educators, or language learners in answering these questions, to share aspects of their academic work, and to give their own personal opinions on issues that had emerged throughout the conference.

Conclusion, outcomes, and implications for applied linguistics

The objective of this two-day conference was to promote as much collaborative dialogue as possible about informal L2 learning practices outside the classroom, whether and how such practices can be integrated into formal learning settings, as well as the challenges associated with such an endeavour. The objective was achieved as researchers and practitioners from various backgrounds were brought together for the first time to clearly define the emerging field of informal L2 learning, discuss appropriate theoretical frameworks, situate their individual work in the wider field and help create an agenda for future research.

One of the main conclusions of the seminar was that engaging with an L2 outside the classroom is the reality for many language users, nowadays more than ever before. Questions were raised, however, as to the role of intentionality in informal L2 learning and to define more explicitly what does and does not constitute 'informal' practices. It was acknowledged that there is high intercultural and individual variation in these practices, and that, for this reason, definitions need to be highly specific and contextualised. Discussions were also held on the need for a unifying theoretical framework for ISLL and how it links to other research areas within applied linguistics, such as L2 acquisition, learner autonomy, and computer assisted language learning. Further areas for research in the field were identified, among which were:

- further work on mapping informal L2 practices, particularly in non-European contexts and target languages other than English
- further studies on the relationship of informal practices with variables beyond lexicogrammatical proficiency, such as language learning motivation, self-efficacy, language learning enjoyment, and anxiety
- explorations of ways to encourage students' engagement in informal language practices beyond formal learning contexts

Finally, the central practical aim of the seminar was the creation of a network for researchers and practitioners interested in ISLL to facilitate continued interaction and collaboration beyond the event. Several initiatives are now under way: first, a JISC mailing list is being set up and the conference website (www.informalL2learning.wordpress.com) will be re-designed to serve as a central place for sharing relevant information about the network. Second, several delegates are working together to organise regular 'digital roundtable meetings' as a way for researchers to present, discuss, and receive feedback on their research projects, particularly work in progress. Finally, there is also an initiative to explore the possibility of holding another conference such as this BAAL/CUP seminar, at one of the keynote speakers' institutions, in one or two years' time.

Endnotes

[1] Anglia Ruskin University, Cardiff University, Durham University, Liverpool International College, The Open University, The UCL Institute of Education, University of Bath, University of Birmingham, University of Central Lancashire, University of Essex, University of Leeds, University of Oxford, University of Southampton, University of Warwick, University of York.
[2] Austria, China, France, Germany, Japan, Oman, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the USA.

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