The learner, the media and the community: How does learning take place in the other CALL triangle?

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Abstract

In this research project, students in applied linguistics were asked to keep blogs over a three-month period in which they reported on their online informal learning of English through activities such as social networking, downloading films and TV series and listening to music on demand. The study is situated within the framework of complexity theory, many aspects of which are well suited to describing informal language development. The blogs are analysed according to a number of learning processes suggested by Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) and a corresponding range of learning activities are observed. Finally, suggestions are made as to possible classroom applications of this work.

Keywords: Online informal learning of English; Complex dynamic systems; learning blogs; emic research

1. Introduction

Research into online informal language learning has already drawn attention to the fact that learners first exposed to English in the classroom setting frequently become involved in informal target language practices such as chatting or social networking online, downloading or streaming original version television series, and choosing music in English via on-demand services (Sockett, 2011; Toffoli & Sockett, 2010). Some 60% of University students in France regularly download original version films and TV series, while some 30% are involved in social networking in English. Hence the informal learner interacts both with target language media, and with a community of users of the language. These practices often occur in complex and idiosyncratic forms due to interactions between these different factors in the context of a continuing formal learning process (most students in France have required language classes, usually in English, around 24-48 hours per year). Informal learning for these students is generally incidental (Stevens 2010; Tissot, 2004; Rieder, 2003), the intention of these activities being communication rather than language learning.

From a theoretical standpoint this type of learning is best understood within the framework of dynamic systems theory (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Van Geert 2008), while the way in which

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informal learning supports formal learning can be understood as additional sensory stimulation, to use the term suggested by Wright et al (2010).

The practices of the informal learning of English online are now well understood. However the language acquisition which results requires more detailed research, since attentional constraints and factors such as the private nature of informal language activities make data collection more difficult than in a classroom setting.

2. Method

A preliminary study (Sockett & Toffoli, 2012) suggested that learners are principally aware of vocabulary acquisition as a consequence of informal online activities. In this study, we adopt an emic approach, using qualitative data from blogs written by students training in language didactics, relating to their own informal online learning of English.

Nine students, with a B2 or C1 level of English, took part in the study in a final year English class which was part of a two-year Masters programme in Language Didactics. The participants were asked to write about occasions over a three-month period on which they were involved in English use informally, with particular reference to skills and knowledge of the language which were gained. The purpose of this approach is to obtain first hand insights into the way language learners with knowledge of language learning theories perceive their own informal learning of English.

3. Results

The 35000-word corpus obtained from this study was analysed using the seven categories of learning process suggested by Larsen-Freeman & Cameron (2008:118). One example from each category is presented here. Each example is preceded by the initials of the student and contains bold print indicating comments of particular relevance to the learning process.

1. Establish joint attention: focus on task.
AGA. One thing I would like to precise is that **my English-speaking friends never correct me when I make a mistake**, although I had asked them to do so at first. **They only ask me questions when they do not understand what I mean and this is how they help to correct myself**... The last thing I would like to mention is that I never use a dictionary when I write on Facebook. I do not ask myself too much questions **because I try to write spontaneously, as if I were speaking face to face with someone, otherwise I would spend too much time trying to find always the best word or the best expression as I demand a lot of myself, and it would spoil the pleasure I take in interacting in English on Facebook!**

2. Understand the communicative intentions of others: focusing on meaning
NV. After repeated listening, I begin to know the approximate lyrics and I like to know what I am exactly humming. **More than just the lyrics (that I check on different websites via Google), I am interested in understanding the meaning of the song**. Although I understand the words, I find it difficult to get the real meaning behind these poetic phrases, metaphors and cultural allusions. Indeed, a song is often subjective and one can interpret it as he wants. **I like to compare what I think of the song, what the other people think and what the artist actually meant. The website Song Facts offers these types of information**.

3. Forming Categories: an aid to task management
SDA: I first used Google and I found some websites with steps that I should follow to do perfect horror make-up. Rapidly I realised **that the presence of some specific vocabulary made me misunderstand the steps of the process. I decided to switch to a more visual explanation and I chose to find a video on *Youtube*. The specific vocabulary was also used but it was associated with the objects or a gesture**. Due to the visualisation of the steps, I was able to understand the technical words used in the writing and the visual explanation. I was also able to see the final result that I was supposed to have.

4. Detecting patterns: Exposure to real language in real contexts
NV. (subtitled TV series) **At first, it was a rather difficult for me to understand all of it, especially for the series with specific vocabulary, such as medical words in ER and Grey's Anatomy or police expressions in Dexter and Alias. But eventually, I got used to it, I learnt a lot of new vocabulary and**

now, I can understand it. I also learnt a lot of informal language and slang! Words and expressions that I can use with my friends, in a relaxed and informal situation.

5. Imitate: Interaction involves mirroring partner discourse

AGA. I think that the reason why there has been such a change is that **I gradually realized that writing in English and reading my friends' answers could help me learn vocabulary, but also abbreviations, and above all, new expressions (colloquial expressions, for the most part).** ... **I unconsciously or more exactly naturally reuse my friends' expressions when I write to them, but also when I am led to speak English**, which is a real satisfaction.

6. Notice novelty: the good thing about "other foreigner talk"

NV. It is obvious **that we do mistakes by translating or transposing the structure directly from our L1. I don't always see mine** (otherwise I would not do those mistakes), but with this in mind, **I noticed mistakes in the e-mail of my contact. It struck me because there were formulations I don't usually read**, as much as I remember... It made me think about my own tendency to transpose the French structure in my writing productions in English.

7. Have the social drive to interact with others: real cognitive tasks
SH2. When I have a question about an expression or anything concerning the English language, he tries to explain it to me as good as he can. I think this is a kind of "horizontal experience" as in class, where the English teacher also (or at least most of the time) speaks in English. **However, in this case, I do not speak or write in English because I have to, but because I like to. The language technically only serves to communicate and is not the main subject of or reason for communication.**

4. Discussion

The results of the study show that the general cognitive processes, suggested by Larsen Freeman and Cameron (2008) as driving second language development, are occurring in informal learning activities. The process is initiated by a social drive to interact with others in real cognitive tasks. The messages received in these interactions contain a range of intentions which are perceived by the non-native language user, who uses strategies such as detecting patterns, creating categories and noticing novelty to process the information, and then, in the case of bi-directional communication, reuses chunks of the language in order to indicate his or her own intentions and complete the task.

5. Conclusions

This study sought to relate complexity theory to the informal learning of English. This is a relatively new area and allows scope for further research into language acquisition in informal contexts, classroom practices with informal learners and the extent to which these phenomena occur in the learning of languages other than English.

Teachers of English in countries where learners are engaging in these activities could build on them in the classroom in a number of ways. While the private nature of much informal communication (particularly social networking) precludes direct use of many learner activities in the classroom, anonymous class surveys of these practices are a good way of treating learners as language users, raising the profile of informal English use and emphasizing its validity. Classroom activities can reflect themes favoured by learners in their day to day use of English, and can be seen as "bridging activities" (Thorne and Reinhardt 2008) towards real world language use.

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