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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN INFORMAL LANGUAGE LEARNING AND FORMAL INSTRUCTION: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY

ABSTRACT

*The paper considers approaches to integrating informal language learning (*often referred to as 'digital' – IDLL*) with formal instruction across various educational contexts. Research confirms that IDLL, driven by motivation, is crucial for developing learner autonomy and real-world communicative competence. The quality and variety of digital exposure are found to be more efficient than the quantity. The author states that formal and informal learning should be viewed as a single, continuous learning spectrum. Structured models are implemented in higher education to formalize IDLL. These include requiring students to maintain graded learning logs based on their digital activity, implementing project-based learning models which involve the use of authentic informal resources, and formalizing social practice through required virtual interaction. These models emphasize a teacher's role as a facilitator tasked with providing effective, cognitive, and behavioral support for self-directed learning. It is emphasized that assessment of informal learning outcomes presents significant challenges.*

*The main of them is the 'formalizing paradox', where imposed grading structure destroys the intrinsic motivation and authenticity of spontaneous informal engagement. Traditional assessment tools suffer from a focus mismatch, failing to accurately measure pragmatic and cultural gains from IDLL. Further complexities involve equity concerns regarding unequal digital access, time availability and the issues of assessment validity. To address these challenges, the author relies on mixed-methods designs combining quantitative methods (*surveys, proficiency tests*) to measure frequency and outcomes, with qualitative methods (*reflective journals, interviews*) to assess a learner's sense of agency and process.*

The study concludes that maximizing the value of informal learning requires a dual approach: developing valid and reliable assessment tools that accurately measure informal outcomes, and improving teacher competency in evaluating autonomous work. This institutional necessity is underscored by legislative basis to formally validate learning outcomes gained through non-formal education.

Keywords: *informal FL learning, formal instruction, digital learning environment, social networks, learner autonomy, quantitative methods, qualitative methods, informal learning outcomes.*

ПОЄДНАННЯ ІНФОРМАЛЬНОГО ВИВЧЕННЯМ МОВИ ТА ФОРМАЛЬНОГО НАВЧАННЯ: КРОС-КУЛЬТУРНЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ

АНОТАЦІЯ

У статті розглядаються підходи до інтеграції інформального вивчення мови (яке часто називають «цифровим» – ІЦВМ) з формальним навчанням у різних освітніх контекстах. Дослідження підтверджує, що ІЦВМ, яке стимулюється мотивацією, має вирішальне значення для розвитку автономії студентів та їх комунікативної компетентності в реальних умовах спілкування. Виявлено, що якість та різноманітність цифрового впливу є більш ефективними, ніж його кількість. Автор стверджує, що формальне та інформальне навчання слід розглядати у комплексі. У вищій освіті впроваджуються структуровані моделі для формалізації ІЦВМ. Вони передбачають для студентів необхідність вести навчальні журнали оцінювання, що фіксують їхню навчально-цифрову активність; впровадження моделей проєктного навчання мови, які передбачають використання неформальних автентичних ресурсів; а також формалізацію соціальної практики через обов'язкову віртуальну взаємодію. Ці моделі підкреслюють роль викладача як фасилітатора, завданням якого є надання ефективної, когнітивної та поведінкової підтримки самостійному навчанню. Наголошується, що оцінювання результатів інформального навчання створює значні виклики. Основним із них є «парадокс формалізації», коли нав'язування критеріїв оцінювання руйнує внутрішню мотивацію та спонтанність інформальної взаємодії. Традиційні інструменти оцінювання не здатні точно виміряти прагматичні та культурні здобутки, отримані у результаті інформального вивчення мови. Додаткові складнощі пов'язані з проблемами нерівномірного доступу до цифрових ресурсів, часовими обмеженнями та валідністю оцінювання. Для подолання цих викликів у статті пропонуються змішані методи, що включають кількісні (опитування, тести на знання мови) для оцінювання результатів, та якісні (рефлексивні журнали, інтерв'ю) для оцінки студентами власної ефективності та самого процесу. У дослідженні зроблено висновок, що максимізація цінності інформального навчання вимагає комбінованого підходу: розробки валідних та надійних інструментів оцінювання, які точно вимірюють інформальні результати, та підвищення компетентності викладачів в оцінюванні самостійної роботи. Ця інституційна необхідність має бути забезпечена нормативно-законодавчою базою для офіційного підтвердження результатів, отриманих шляхом інформальної освіти.

Ключові слова: *інформальне вивчення ІМ, формальне навчання, цифрове освітнє середовище, соціальні мережі, автономія студента, кількісні методи, якісні методи, результати інформального навчання.*

INTRODUCTION

Foreign language (FL) acquisition increasingly occurs in both formal classroom settings and informal contexts such as digital media, online communities, gaming, social interaction and travel. While formal instruction provides structure and systematic skill development, informal learning often involves learner autonomy, motivation, and real-world communicative competence.

Formal FL instruction often overlooks the potential of informal learning experiences. Despite the growing recognition of informal learning, its integration into formal classroom instruction varies significantly across countries. Teachers may lack

methodological guidance for integrating informal learning into classroom practice. Cultural, curricular, and pedagogical differences influence how teachers perceive, apply, and balance their approaches. Taking into account the outcomes of informal learning is essential for designing curricula and teacher training programs that leverage both informal and formal learning effectively This study considers cross-cultural variations in approaches to integrating informal foreign language learning and formal instruction, with the aim of identifying effective, internationally applicable strategies.

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

Thus, the aim of our study is to research the approaches to integrating informal FL learning and formal instruction in the cross-cultural context and to analyse how teachers can implement and adapt these approaches in different educational contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODS

Research on informal language learning is currently dominated by three interconnected themes: the ubiquity of digital environments, the necessity of learner autonomy and the push for integration with formal instruction.

The vast majority of contemporary research has shifted from generic 'informal learning' to the technologically-mediated context, most often identified as Informal Digital Language Learning (IDLL) (Barkati et al., 2024; Guo & Lee, 2023; Lee & Lee, 2021; Rezai et al., 2024).

IDLL is consistently defined as language learning that occurs autonomously in out-of-class digital contexts independent of formal instruction (Lee & Lee, 2021).

Activities frequently studied include: receptive – watching FL YouTube videos, engaging with FL content on social media, streaming; productive – writing comments or interacting with others in a FL on social media or in online games (Toffoli et al., 2023).

The quality (diversity and variety) of IDLL activities is more significantly associated with FL vocabulary and proficiency outcomes than the sheer quantity (frequency/amount of time spent). This suggests that varied exposure combining both meaning-focused (e.g. watching a movie) and form-focused (e.g. using a language app) activities is essential.

Researchers are increasingly investigating the role of modern tools, such as the pedagogical potential of AI Chatbots, to enhance receptive skills and enrich out-of-class learning environments (Toffoli et al., 2023).

The core link between informal learning and learner autonomy (the ability to take charge of one's own learning) has been defined as a primary research focus. (Benson, 2013).

The shift to emergency remote teaching during the pandemic forced a greater emphasis on self-accessment and virtual learning, providing an unplanned natural experiment on learner autonomy. Studies from this period highlight that while teachers and learners recognized the potential, many struggled with self-management skills required for independent learning (Oportus-Torres et al., 2024).

Informal learning is powerful because the focus of control rests with the learner. Engagement with informal activities gives students a sense of control over their language learning, which is a vital step in developing learner autonomy (Benson, 2013).

A persistent theme is the tension between autonomous practice and established formal learning culture. Learners, when given full autonomy online, sometimes revert to highly structured, classroom-like behaviors (like note-taking and seeking credentialed resources) that they are most familiar with, even viewing unstructured content (like pop culture) as a 'guilty pleasure' rather than a legitimate learning space (Benson, 2013).

Recent studies have moved beyond simply confirming a positive link to identifying the specific psychological mechanisms through which informal learning leads to success. The concept of Flow Theory is frequently used to explain engagement in IDLL. When learners' skills match the enjoyment/challenge of an informal activity, they enter a state of 'flow' that boosts their engagement, persistence, and enjoyment, which in turn leads to better outcomes (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2010).

Research suggests that informal digital learning positively influences online self-efficacy (a belief in one's ability to learn digitally) and digital competence, which then serves as a partial mediator in the relationship between digital literacy and overall academic success (Barkati et al., 2024).

Studies examining motivational factors have revealed that instrumental motivation (using the language for a practical goal, e.g. work, travel) and interest in the language are highly significant predictors of FL proficiency gained through informal means (Truong, 2021; Ghafar, 2023). The social aspect is also crucial, with the density of a learner's social network of FL speakers being a strong predictor of mastery (Malerba, 2012).

There is a clear pedagogical shift towards explicitly integrating informal learning into formal curricula. The field has moved from viewing them as separate entities to placing them on a continuum. Explicit integration, where teachers acknowledge students' out-of-class digital habits, has been shown to increase student engagement with informal learning, provide opportunities for practical oral practice, and directly support the development of learner autonomy. Teachers are increasingly seen as facilitators of informal learning, tasked with providing affective support (recognizing and encouraging IDLL), cognitive support (providing tips and resources), and behavioral support (acting as role models) (Rezai et al., 2024).

The complexity of measuring this 'balance' has led to a greater reliance on mixed-methods designs, combining quantitative scales (to measure IDLL frequency, motivation, and proficiency scores) with qualitative methods like virtual ethnography and reflective journals (to understand a learner's individual, autonomous process) (Barkati et al., 2024; Lee & Lee, 2021).

Thus, current research strongly suggests that informal FL learning and formal instruction should be regarded as interconnected aspects of a single, continuous learning spectrum rather than distinct, separate categories.

RESULTS

Major U.S. universities have actively introduced or leveraged informal language learning within their formal curricula, particularly in Foreign Language and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Contemporary FL university programs in are increasingly adopting structured models to formally integrate students' informal learning habits with the academic curriculum, moving past simple encouragement to implementing systems of accountability.

One such approach involves Formal Recognition and Accountability, where instructors at FL programs first conduct a 'curriculum audit' or survey to understand students' existing IDLL activities, such as media consumption or gaming. This data then drives formal assignments: students are required to maintain an Informal Learning Journal, logging and reflecting on their FL consumption for a formal grade, and receive contextualized homework that directly references the informal content they are already engaging with (e.g. using a Netflix clip to identify a grammar point) (Toffoli et al., 2023). This method operationalizes autonomous learning by giving it explicit institutional recognition.

A second model, the Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL) Model, centers the formal course around an extended, graded task that mandates the use of authentic, external informal resources. In intermediate university FL courses, for instance, a project (like creating a travel guide) requires a Resource Mandate demanding evidence of resourceful searching across informal channels, such as community forums or YouTube vlogger content. The final grade is based not only on the FL product but also on a metacognitive reflection detailing how the informal sources challenged them or provided unique input missing from the textbook. This approach aligns with integration models by structurally steering learners toward beneficial, self-directed resource discovery, thus actively nurturing learner autonomy (Hill, 2018).

The Language Exchange Program / Virtual Tandem Requirement directly formalizes the social and interactional dimensions of informal learning, especially in upper-level FL courses focused on communicative competence. This involves setting mandatory hours when students must complete a minimum amount of FL practice with native speakers via virtual platforms. Crucially, they must submit a post-interaction report that documents specific cultural encounters, idiomatic phrases learned, or communication strategies used. This method addresses the critical need for practical communicative skills by institutionalizing the social engagement component, ensuring accountability for autonomous interaction with the FL community. The above mentioned examples illustrate a significant pedagogical shift toward designing formal systems that reward and assess students' autonomous engagement with the FL world outside the classroom (American University, Washington, D.C., 2025).

In the context of balancing informal and formal language learning, researchers often use a combination of quantitative instruments (surveys, tests) and qualitative techniques (interviews, journals) to gain comprehensive insights.

Learner autonomy is defined as the capacity to take charge of one's own learning (Benson, 2013). Because it's a cognitive and behavioral trait, it requires a multi-faceted approach. The measurement of learner autonomy in FL learning applies a diverse set of tools that fall primarily into two methodological categories: quantitative and qualitative.

Quantitative methods focus on assessing the perceived level of autonomy and the frequency of autonomous behaviors. These methods include Self-Report Surveys (like the Learner Autonomy Scale), which typically use a Likert format to measure a learner's subjective perception of their own self-management, goal-setting abilities, and reflection practices (Benson, 2013). Another quantitative tool is the Informal Learning Inventory (such as the IDLL Inventory), which shifts the focus to Behavioral Autonomy by tracking the frequency with which learners engage in independent activities outside the classroom, such as watching FL content or using language apps. Both these quantitative measures provide scalable data useful for statistical analysis regarding the *what* and *how much* of autonomous learning (Lee & Lee, 2021).

Qualitative methods differ by attempting to reveal the complexities of a learner's mindset, exploring their decision-making process, sense of control (agency), personal beliefs, and motivational goals. Tools like Reflective Journals or Diaries ask learners to log their FL activities and articulate the reasons and strategies behind their choices. Analysis of these journals through thematic coding reveals the process of autonomous decision-making and the challenges encountered, assessing a learner's sense of agency.

Semi-Structured Interviews are employed to investigate a learner's underlying beliefs and intentions. By asking open-ended questions about their perception of control,

motivation, and a teacher's role, researchers can uncover the personal and contextual factors that shape their autonomous behavior. This qualitative approach provides the critical *why* and *how* behind the measured autonomy, offering context that pure numbers cannot.

Informal Learning Outcomes can be assessed both objectively (standardized tests) and subjectively (self-assessment). Assessment relies on both quantitative and qualitative methods to focus on different dimensions of a learner's ability.

Quantitative tools are primarily used for objective measurement and comparison. The Standardized Proficiency Tests are a key quantitative method, often employing a pre/post-test design to measure gains in objective proficiency. These tests typically focus on receptive skills such as vocabulary and reading comprehension, which are strongly influenced by exposure through both formal and informal learning. Examples include well-known instruments like the Vocabulary Levels Test or sub-scores from standardized placement exams (e.g. TOEFL/IELTS, CEFR-aligned tests). A second quantitative tool is Grammar/Usage Tests. These focus on Structural Accuracy through formats like multiple-choice questions and gap-filling exercises. This method measures the retention of specific form-focused knowledge often acquired through structured classroom instruction, sometimes using custom-designed tests that cover the exact grammar points taught in a formal curriculum (The University of Texas at Austin, 2025).

In addition to objective testing, two other methods assess a learner's experience and practical output. The Self-Assessment of Proficiency is a quantitative method that assesses perceived competence. By using a Likert scale (e.g. rating confidence from 1 to 7), this tool measures a learner's self-efficacy and confidence in using a FL, which is a vital aspect of motivation and willingness to communicate.

Performance-Based Tasks employ a qualitative methodology to assess communicative competence. This method goes beyond discrete-point testing by assessing practical, holistic skills like fluency, complexity, and overall effectiveness of communication. These tasks, which might include role-plays or presentations, rely on qualitative data – coded transcripts or ratings from independent observers using a holistic rubric – to gauge a learner's real-world communicative competence.

Assessing integrated informal language learning presents several interconnected challenges that stem from the very nature of informal learning itself. One major difficulty concerns the tension between authenticity and accountability. Informal learning is inherently unstructured, autonomous, and often unintentional, but it requires adding grading structure, which can fundamentally alter the experience. This creates a 'formalizing paradox': once an instructor assigns tasks such as watching a set amount of FL content and logging it, the activity shifts from intrinsically motivated engagement to an extrinsic requirement, potentially diminishing enjoyment and the authenticity that make informal learning effective (Toffoli et al., 2023). There is also a significant challenge of accurately assessing the quality of the linguistic material (or data) to which students are exposed; instructors cannot determine whether students truly engaged with the material or merely completed the minimal, verifiable task such as submitting a log.

The second challenge lies in defining and measuring learning outcomes. Traditional assessment tools are poorly suited for assessing the types of gains informal learning produces, such as fluency, cultural insight, pragmatic competence, and passive vocabulary growth – skills that standardized tests struggle to measure. This mismatch means that students may demonstrate real-world communicative improvements while still performing poorly on grammar-focused assessments (University of Michigan, 2025).

Further complicating matters is the lack of standardization: since students engage with diverse informal resources – from video games to news articles – their learning outcomes vary widely, making a single common assessment unfair or invalid. The attribution problem also arises, as it is often impossible to determine whether learning gains stemmed from informal activities or from formal instruction.

Equity and access present additional concerns when informal digital activities are incorporated into formal assessment. Although digital access is widespread, disparities remain in terms of internet speed, device quality, and availability of paid platforms, meaning that requiring digitally mediated informal learning may inadvertently disadvantage students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Time availability also varies significantly: students with jobs, caregiving responsibilities, or limited unstructured time may be unable to engage as extensively as their peers, making quantity-based evaluation potentially inequitable (Harvard University, 2025).

Issues of assessment validity and reliability arise when instructors attempt to evaluate subjective and highly variable informal learning experiences. When students submit reflective journals or post-interaction reports, grades often end up reflecting their writing ability or analytical skills rather than the quality of the informal learning itself. Moreover, many instructors lack training in assessing autonomous, non-traditional learning artifacts; as Lee (2021) argues, effective integration requires teachers to develop new competencies as facilitators and evaluators of self-directed learning – skills not typically emphasized in current teacher preparation programs (Lee and Lee, 2021).

In Ukraine integration of informal language learning and formal instruction is characterized by legislative recognition, focus on digital tools, and increased practical necessity due to recent national challenges (the pandemic and the war). While the Ukrainian Law on Education formally distinguishes between formal (regulated by state qualifications), non-formal (structured programs leading to a professional certificate), and informal (self-directed, everyday) learning, the legal framework for the recognition and validation of informal learning outcomes is still being implemented.

Since 2022, many higher and professional pre-higher education institutions have established internal procedures to recognize learning outcomes gained through non-formal and informal education, often for employees seeking professional qualifications or for students who have obtained international language certificates (e.g. including results in a student's rating). This legal recognition is crucial as it creates an incentive for students to pursue autonomous learning.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS OF FURTHER RESEARCH

The research concludes that the integration of informal language learning and formal instruction is a key educational priority, stemming from the realization that both of them must be viewed as a single, uninterrupted flow where different experiences are closely linked. IDLL, which is based on instrumental motivation and psychological flow, is vital for developing learner autonomy and real-world communicative competence, with the quality and variety of digital exposure being more predictive of success than mere quantity. To formally bridge this gap, institutions are successfully implementing structured models that impose accountability while granting formal recognition to autonomous effort. These models include requiring graded Informal Learning Journals based on digital activity, implementing Project-Based Language Learning that involves the use of informal resources, and formalizing social interaction through Virtual Tandem requirements, all of which emphasizing a teacher's role as a facilitator of self-directed learning.

Assessment of this integration faces some challenges. The 'formalizing paradox' arises because imposing structure for grading can destroy the intrinsic motivation and authenticity of spontaneous informal engagement. Traditional assessment tools suffer from a focus mismatch, as they fail to assess the pragmatic and cultural gains of IDLL, leading to an attribution problem where gains cannot be isolated from formal instruction. Further complexities arise from equity concerns regarding unequal digital access and time availability, and persistent issues with assessment validity because grades often measure formal skills (like reflection) rather than the informal experience itself. Maximizing the value of informal learning requires a dual approach: fixing faulty assessment methods and improving teacher competency in evaluating autonomous work. This institutional necessity is highlighted by legislative moves in Ukraine to formally validate informal and non-formal education outcomes.

Future research may be focused on developing valid and reliable assessment tools that assess informal learning outcomes. There is a need to investigate equity issues, particularly how socio-economic and technological inequalities affect access to informal digital learning. Further work is required to design effective teacher training models that prepare instructors to facilitate and evaluate informal learning. Long-term research could clarify how learner autonomy develops over time, while emerging AI tools require understanding their potential role in supporting informal language learning. Research should focus on practical mechanisms to formally recognize and validate informal learning within national qualification frameworks.

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