Informal and deliberate learning with new technologies

Ruth Trinder

Due to the ready availability of new technologies, opportunities for the incidental as well as deliberate practice of English have multiplied and far exceed what can be done in more formal environments. Yet, despite the sizeable literature on the classroom-based use of specific digital resources, few studies have investigated how students evaluate increased exposure to English in terms of learning potential. This article argues that online informal learning of English deserves more attention, and presents an empirical study surveying Austrian university students’ practices and preferences related to new media in independent settings. The participants’ perceptions of the usefulness of a range of digital resources for the acquisition of language skills are analysed and juxtaposed with their opinions on in-class use of technology. Results indicate a clear preference for well-established, time-honoured media (film, online dictionaries, email) in self-regulated contexts, as well as diverging opinions on the use of technologies in classroom settings.

In Austria, the penetration of smartphones and high-speed internet is above the European average. Students have easy and cheap access to a wide array of technologies, employing them regularly for entertainment, personal communication, and information seeking. Downloading services and streaming have made English-language films and television series readily available in a country where ‘regular’ television only shows dubbed programmes, while social media offer membership and interaction opportunities in international communities. With the proliferation of mobile internet-enabled devices, this means that students are increasingly exposed to English in informal settings.

The rise of networked and mobile technologies is a global phenomenon that causes changes in communication patterns as well as English-language use. Broadband internet connections and Wi-Fi are ubiquitous and are used for work, leisure, and shopping. As Sockett (2014) points out, these activities are frequently conducted in English, so that, for many young people, the classroom setting represents only one amongst a multitude of opportunities for contact with the target language. Through the internet, language learners are morphing into matter-of-course language users, with language development a welcome by-product of online practices such as social networking, emailing, and downloading. In
fact, as Toffoli and Sockett (2015) observe, young people spend more time learning English in online than in formal, institutional settings. Yet, the question of how the potential of such informal learning opportunities is assessed by learners—and whether it is deliberately exploited by them—has received little attention. Notable exceptions are studies by Stevens (2009), Steel and Levy (2013), and Sockett (ibid.), whose surveys explore the relative popularity and take-up of various technological tools both in and out of the classroom, and the work of Jarvis (for example 2014), which emphasizes the pervasiveness of mobile assisted language use.

Informal learning is learner-controlled, not linked to any course or institution, and takes place outside the classroom. Stevens (ibid.: 12) defines it as:

> Learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or ‘incidental’/random).

However, with the normalization of online applications and the concomitant frequent exposure of non-native English speakers to English-language media and communities, the question arises of whether informal learning is still mainly random and non-intentional. In her discussion of the concepts, Rieder (2003: 28) clarifies that incidental (or ‘unintentional’) learning can involve both explicit and implicit processes; incidental explicit learning is distinguished from its counterpart by the learner’s awareness of both process and product of learning.

In planning this study, one of my fundamental contentions is that the benefits of informal engagement with online English-language resources do not go unnoticed by experienced language learners. More than that, I expect the intentional aspect to gain in importance in informal environments, with students deciding to access resources such as news sites in English even though the equivalent content is available in their native language, simply because it benefits their English.

Technology pervades so many aspects of modern life that the division between face-to-face and technologically mediated learning environments is becoming blurred. Formal, institutional learning spaces now exist in a variety of hybrid forms such as blended or flipped classrooms which combine face-to-face and online instruction (Gruba, Hinkelman, and Cárdenas-Claros 2016). What is more, teacher-fronted classrooms have become increasingly ‘porous’ (Blake 2009: 831). Internet access, PowerPoint, and digital projectors are employed in an ad hoc or principled way to present authentic materials to students, who in turn ( overtly or covertly, encouraged or discouraged by teachers) consult dictionaries and web sources on mobile devices.

Also, outside the classroom, face-to-face communication does not necessarily mean technology-free. Conversations in the target language are expedited with the help of digital dictionaries. Many casual interactions revolve around input obtained from mobile devices, be
they online postings, videos, or shopping sites. However, despite the preponderance of technology-enhanced input and communication, it is still not sufficiently clear how often student-initiated online activities take place in English, whether their potential is realized and deliberately exploited by learners, and in what way the easy access to technology outside affects students’ views on the desirability of in-class use of technology.

I aim to address at least some of these points by presenting the findings of an empirical, questionnaire-based study conducted with students at Vienna University of Economics. I will focus on the following areas of student behaviour and attitudes:

1. frequency of use and perceptions of usefulness of technologies for the acquisition of language skills;
2. explicit/intentional learning in informal contexts;
3. reasons behind technology choices; and
4. attitudes towards technology use in class.

The first section surveys students’ experiences with a variety of digital applications. It investigates how frequently a number of technologies are used, how helpful they have been for language learning in general, and how useful they are considered to be for the development of a range of language competencies (reading, writing, speaking, listening, communicative competence, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and Business English).

Section two explores the overlaps between informal, explicit, and deliberate learning. After all, technology use in informal settings is primarily driven by the intention to communicate (Toffoli and Socket op.cit.) rather than the intention to learn. Consequently, it is not necessarily to be expected that the technologies students like using in English for leisure purposes will be the same as those they consider to be highly beneficial for learning. On the other hand, if we credit students with the metacognitive skills required to reflect on their own strengths and shortcomings as language learners, it is reasonable to assume that they may engage in informal activities with the express purpose of improving certain language skills.

Section three first focuses on television series/films as the most highly ranked resource in terms of both frequency of use and skills acquisition. Drawing on student comments in the form of open-ended questionnaire responses, reasons that make this medium such an attractive learning resource are subsequently identified. Second, students’ practices and views on the relative merits of communication media (in particular, Facebook and chat) will be addressed. Respondents’ previously ascertained belief in the central role of communication (Trinder 2013) was not borne out by high rankings (relating to skills acquisition) of communication media in the current study. Potential reasons behind this conundrum will be discussed.

In the final section, having established participants’ favourite media for informal learning (see above), their views on the ‘teacher-controlled’ use of technology will be explored. Given the improved access to target language resources beyond the classroom, students do not depend on teachers
anymore to provide authentic audiovisual or written materials. More experienced learners in particular are able to make informed judgements about what best serves their needs and goals in independent contexts, and believe themselves similarly capable of assessing the effectiveness of classroom practices.

Participants and procedure

For the study, quantitative and qualitative data were collected by means of a questionnaire including Likert-type ratings and free text responses to open questions. The data were interpreted through a combination of descriptive statistics and a thematic analysis of open-response questions. The sample consists of 175 Austrian university students. Results provide a broad indication of how young adults—in this case, business students with intermediate to advanced-level English—practise informal learning and blend digital tools with more traditional resources.

Learning context

Regarding the wider context in which the respondents in this study learn and use English, as indicated, Austria is quite privileged concerning the availability and cost of digital resources. All the questionnaire respondents own smartphones and at least one other portable device (for example a notebook, netbook, iPad). As far as the learning environment in its narrower sense is concerned, the participants are undergraduates at the Vienna University of Economics. They attend face-to-face English for Specific Purposes (ESP) language classes as part of their studies, which are complemented by the university’s e-learning platform and customized online activities (referred to below as BE (Business English) e-learning modules).

Learner contributions

Students tend to bring their individual attributes (for example learner beliefs, learning experiences, expectations) to the classroom, and evaluate the extent to which courses meet their requirements. In turn, the perceived affordances and deficiencies of classes can be expected to influence the choice of independent resources. Thus, students often note that, due to class sizes and an emphasis on specialist (business) language, there is not enough oral interaction or opportunity to practise general English (Trinder op.cit.). For such practice, they may turn to online resources and interlocutors outside the classroom.

Findings and discussion

Quantitative data

The results attest to regular online activity in English. Tables 1 and 2 each show eight technologies, ranked according to reported frequency of use (columns 1 and 3). Column 4 details students’ views on how useful the technology has been in terms of improving their English; column 5 lists the applications rated amongst the top three for their potential to develop specific skills and domains.

Technologies aimed at language learning

Noteworthy are, first of all, the low rankings of discipline-specific applications (online grammars and language learning sites, ranks 12 and 16, respectively) in terms of their regularity of use and perceived usefulness. This suggests that for deliberate study, either more conventional material and social resources (for example books, teachers, native speakers) or technologies with a different primary focus (for instance news sites) are preferred. Exceptions are digital dictionaries and, a little more surprisingly, the course-specific e-learning modules. The
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (frequency)</th>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Frequency: technology used regularly (daily or frequently)</th>
<th>Usefulness: has helped very much</th>
<th>Potential usefulness for specific skill (rank 1, 2, 3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Online dictionaries</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>V, W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>TV/radio/video clips/series</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>L, P, S, CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Social networking: e.g. Facebook</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Company or informational websites</td>
<td>Company websites 45% Informational websites 71%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>R, BE, V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Online news sites/journals</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>BE, R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Email</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>W, R, G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>BE e-learning modules</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>G, BE, V, W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Films, etc. on DVD/Blu-ray</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>L, P, S</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: W = writing, L = listening, S = speaking, R = reading, V = vocabulary, P = pronunciation, G = grammar, CC = communicative competence, BE = business English); bold lettering in column five indicates top ranking.

**Table 1**
Technologies used regularly by more than 40% of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (frequency)</th>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Frequency: technology used regularly (daily or frequently)</th>
<th>Usefulness: has helped very much</th>
<th>Potential usefulness for specific skill (rank 1, 2, 3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Written chat (e.g. Skype, Messenger)</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Text messages/SMS</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>E-books/books</td>
<td>E-books 9% Books 35%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Online grammars</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Voice chat (e.g. Skype, Messenger)</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>S, L, P, CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Discussion forums</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Language learning sites/ courses</td>
<td>Online 5% DVD 1%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: W = writing, L = listening, S = speaking, R = reading, V = vocabulary, P = pronunciation, G = grammar, CC = communicative competence, BE = business English); bold lettering in column five indicates top ranking.

**Table 2**
Technologies used regularly by less than 40% of respondents

Informal and deliberate learning with new technologies
latter are assessed as the best application for developing grammatical competence as well as being amongst the top three for three other skills. The fact that the e-learning tool offers streamlined and presumably effective practice activities for the formal written assessment may explain its good ratings.

Second, apart from Facebook and email, communication media (for example chat, discussion forums) are neither used all that much in English nor seen as particularly beneficial for learning. The data indicate that chat, texting, and discussion forums play a very minor role in students’ personal learning environments. Though social media (i.e. Facebook) has gained the top ranking for communicative competence, this is the skill least well-catered for by any technology: only two-thirds (111) agree that social networking enhances communicative competence (see Figure 1).

As the only medium facilitating synchronous oral communication with an interlocutor (and consequently most resembling face-to-face conversations), voice chat has a special position amongst the technologies investigated. Figure 1 depicts the promise it holds for students in those skills areas it could reasonably be expected to benefit, comparing it to Facebook and film/television. Yet notably, though participants acknowledge its potential to improve five language areas, film/television gets better ratings for vocabulary acquisition, listening, and pronunciation. What is more, voice chat does not have a high uptake (one-third do not use it at all in English, only 14 per cent regularly), a striking contradiction given the sample’s previously expressed aim to become ‘fluent’ speakers of English (Trinder op.cit.).

A sizeable literature attests to the benefits of computer-mediated communication, summarized in a recent meta-synthesis by Lin (2015). Yet though chat facilitates ‘conversation in slow motion’ (Beauvois 1992: 445), and is said to have ‘loosened the tongues and the writings of even the shyest students’ (Kramsch 2014: 296), the advanced learners in this study experience things differently. They assess such pared-down virtual
environments as less useful for listening and pronunciation than immersing themselves in the richer, if no less artificial, world of film, and television, which to them appears to be offering more authentic, worthwhile language.

Audiovisual technologies

The top rankings of films and television series in terms of utility and popularity mirror the results of previous studies (Conole 2008; Stevens op.cit.; Steel and Levy op.cit.) surveying students’ technology preferences. The ready availability of English-language television series via the internet is a relatively recent phenomenon in Austria and enjoys enthusiastic uptake, with about two-thirds of the sample regularly watching online. Moreover, film in its different online guises is considered the most useful medium for improving listening skills and pronunciation, and though it offers no opportunities for language production, it is amongst the three best-ranked technologies for developing pronunciation and communicative competence. Viewing current series seems to provide a rich learning experience akin to immersion, with plentiful examples of the kind of English students miss in their formal classes (cf. Trinder op.cit.), i.e. an optimal form of effortless learning whilst enjoying an everyday pastime.

In order to flesh out this quantitative account of students’ technology choices, qualitative data were collected and analysed. Students’ reasons for preferring to watch film and television as an informal, but in many cases intentional, learning activity will be discussed below.

Intentional learning in informal contexts

Seventy-two per cent of respondents confirmed that they deliberately engage in online activities with the explicit aim of improving certain aspects of their English. When asked to name the technology they preferred to use for intentional skills development, two types of technologies were mentioned most frequently.

On the one hand, for these business students, online news sites and journals were the obvious choices for deliberate advancement of professional or ESP vocabulary. Yet, not surprisingly given the positive ratings so far, references to television series, films, and videos were even more common. These audiovisual media are not only credited with the ability to enhance a number of skills but are consciously used for that purpose. Although the primary focus of viewing is clearly entertainment rather than, say, picking up new vocabulary, the comments below (quoted verbatim) illustrate that there has been a shift towards dual purpose engagement:

I started out watching US TV Series when I was studying for my oral A-levels and do that nearly every day ever since. It helps you a lot with your pronunciation, vocabulary and listening skill. I don’t use subtitles as most US series are really easy to understand and subtitles just distract you from trying to understand what was said.

What I really like is watching movies and series in English. I do not just have fun watching these movies, I also improve my vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

That’s the good thing about streaming tv series and movies, you improve your vocabulary and can decide for yourself when you learn.
Personally I like the idea to watch films, documentaries, etc. If you listen to it very attentive, you will benefit a lot in view of communication in real life.

I like watching news or films because that way one can pick up the language seemingly without effort.

The comments suggest that respondents find viewing films and series not only engaging and motivating, but also an (effortless) way of developing a number of language skills. The fact that this positive side effect is recognized and appreciated by the majority of respondents supports my hypothesis that when students choose to interact (or watch, or listen) in English rather than their native language, learning stops being a negligible by-product and becomes a deliberate, even if usually secondary, aim.

On the basis of this data, informal learning is understood to have the following characteristics: it is learner- (or peer-) rather than teacher-initiated, takes place outside class, and combines other goals (entertainment, information search, communication) with language acquisition. Particularly in the case of experienced learners, it tends to involve awareness of the acquisition process and the resulting knowledge (i.e. to be explicit), and may well be intentional.

The following points were extrapolated from students’ answers as well as from the inherent characteristics of the media. They are interpretative in nature, aiming to highlight the factors that make film and television such popular and potentially effective learning resources:

- motivational factors (inherent interest; effortless learning; peer group interest);
- deliberate/noticeable language development;
- high-context exposure; social and cultural insights; pragmatics;
- familiarity of characters; repetitive dramatic situations;
- repeated exposure to chunks, idioms, everyday language, domain-specific lexis;
- different accents, registers, styles, levels of formality; and
- fast speech (help through visual clues, plot).

Reasons for the surprisingly lukewarm attitudes towards voice chat could be identified by means of open-ended questions. Students were asked to explain whether (and if yes, why) they found computer-mediated communication inferior to face-to-face talk.

First, poor sound quality, inferior acoustics, and disruptions/delays in transmission make it harder to pick up the finer points of language and pronunciation. As adding the video function tends to impair the transmission quality, voice chat becomes a purely aural/oral form of communication, and the most frequently expressed disadvantages concerned the missing cues of facial expressions and body language which students consider a vital aid towards understanding. Furthermore, students reported getting distracted by other applications; thus, the multifunctionality of networked/mobile devices represents a disadvantage here. Additionally, constant access to dictionaries ‘allows cheating’. Despite the fact that students appear to spend so much time communicating in virtual rather than face-to-face environments, the...
former were repeatedly referred to as ‘somehow artificial’ and lacking in context. Overall, computer-mediated communication is experienced as less authentic, less focused on the interlocutor and language, and less likely to lead to long-term learning than face-to-face interaction. Thus, to quote just one respondent: ‘Talking face-to-face to a person is different than video chatting. Emotions, little hints and other subconscious things can be better transmitted by direct face-to-face communication’.

These vague feelings about the ‘artificiality’ of the situation, which students express in layman’s terms, find support in a fascinating study by Kern (2014). Kern (ibid.: 341) uncovers the ‘significant mediational issues that underlie videoconferencing’ by drawing attention to the decontextualizations and distortions taking place during telecollaborative exchanges.

The physical classrooms of respondents’ face-to-face Business English classes are equipped with smartboards, projectors, and internet access, potentially facilitating the presentation of authentic, up-to-date websites as well as audio, video, and discipline-specific resources. Teachers avail themselves of these opportunities to differing degrees, but pressure to cover everything in the curriculum means that time spent on supplementary rather than core materials is generally limited.

Students’ opinions on whether the limited contact time should integrate new technologies were rather diverse, ranging along a continuum from ‘online is state of the art’ to ‘the old ways are best’:

- Any use of technology in class increases variety, which in turn makes class more interesting and therefore eases the language learning process.
- I like using technology in class, for example radio or TV, because you get used to listen to the language and learn to distinguish between accents.
- However, technology is sometimes used just to keep students busy during class, which is not meaningful, since I can study that way on my own at home as well and do not have to go to class.
- Technology is used better after class for the independent study, because in-class there should be more speaking, reading and listening instead of using technologies.
- I don’t really like a lot of technology in class because I think it is better to use it at home when I don’t have a teacher who can explain things to me.

Clearly, the fact that students have such easy continuous access to all types of technology outside class strongly colours their views; this sample does not need the teacher to provide resources. However, it could be discerned that while some students were happy to look independently for online resources that would help with their studies, others would prefer the teacher to recommend and thus validate materials for out-of-class use.

Steel (2012: 875) observed that ‘as we consider learning for the future, it is crucial to partner with students to build a picture of emergent technology practices beyond the classroom’. Exploring the applicability of technologies for specific language learning aims from the bottom-up rather than
top-down (i.e. from students rather than from teachers) may provide important insights for teachers. Finding out more about how students use available media and juxtaposing their preferences/strategies with available research (that focuses, for example, on the effects of subtitling on the uptake of vocabulary) is a first step towards making classrooms more relevant and private learning environments more effective for learners.

The study reported on here has shed light on two developments. First, due to the ready availability and cheap access to internet technologies, the focus of technology-mediated learning has shifted from teacher- to student-initiated use. While all respondents use new media as a matter of course for leisure and work, they have diverging opinions about its integration in face-to-face classroom contexts. Some welcome variety in teaching tools, others claim that technology use does not represent the most effective use of contact time.

Second, students have clearly formed conceptions about which technologies promote language learning, and use them accordingly. Media that are not strictly speaking new—film and television series—can now be easily viewed in English via the internet and represent the most popular technology for informal learning. In this case, informal learning involves an element of language choice and is intentional rather than implicit. This is in contrast to communication via email or chat, the primary aim of which is exchange of information. Such interactions often take place in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) environments, are constrained regarding visual stimuli, and are consequently regarded as less authentic, motivating, and effective virtual learning spaces. In other words, students often watch films, but rarely write emails with the deliberate aim of improving their English.

Conclusion

The focus of this article has been on the personal learning environments of fairly advanced students. Yet, the shift from language learner to language user discussed earlier is clearly a global reality that affects classrooms regardless of specific context and level. Students have become ‘digital residents living out at least part of their life with and through mobile devices’ (Jarvis op.cit.: 24) in the L2. Choosing to address rather than ignore this changed reality may actually create more student-centred, relevant, and authentic classrooms as well as contribute to more deliberate and effective use of technology beyond the classroom setting.

For instance, by asking students to find and share digital resources (news articles, forum comments, videos, etc.) that relate to content/topics on the curriculum, to post them on learning management systems or in closed Facebook groups, and to comment on the contributions of others, teachers would bridge informal and formal environments. Such an approach reflects the ‘sharing’ nature of Web 2.0, and lends itself well to classroom discussions on the topic being dealt with as well as on a meta level. Encouraging students to contribute resources that they find appropriate offers opportunities to foster indispensable digital literacy skills such as evaluation of resources concerning pertinence and credibility amongst less experienced learners. According to Jarvis (op.cit.), helping students to become more insightful and responsible digital residents—for example by devising tasks that require them to reflect on issues of security,
plagiarism, and digital footprints—is one of the emergent new challenges facing the ELT profession.

Furthermore, as younger or lower-level learners may be less aware of the potential which their everyday digital activities offer for deliberate learning, they might benefit from having this link made explicit. Focusing class time on learner practices not only validates informal learning, but simultaneously presents opportunities to discuss listening/viewing/reading strategies and to address common misconceptions. With more experienced students sharing their know-how and teachers acting as ‘learning facilitators’ (Sockett op.cit.: 137), the convergence of virtual and real learning spaces can be promoted, and autonomous learning fostered.

To sum up, gaining insights into how students engage with technology might enable teachers to tap into the motivating potential of preferred technologies and assist learners in making more informed choices. Though it may not always be feasible to accommodate student preferences directly by integrating popular media such as video into the classroom, some simple measures represent valuable steps towards promoting optimal use of technology for language learning. These include discussing, validating, and encouraging informal language learning, raising awareness about the benefits of underused resources, exploring reasons for use and rejection, and fostering strategies to better exploit digital tools.

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References
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