

## Review of *Enhancements and limitations to ICT-based informal language learning: Emerging research and opportunities*

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### Enhancements and limitations to ICT-based informal language learning: emerging research and opportunities

Ahmed, R., Al-kadi, A., & Hagar, T.. (Eds.)

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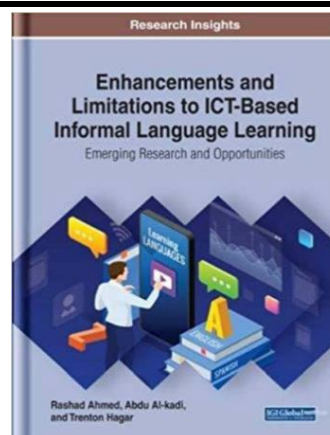
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With the rapid development of information and communication technology (ICT), language learning affordance and opportunities have expanded beyond the traditional classroom (Reinders & Benson, 2017). As today's young learners are growing up in the age of the Internet as *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001), the process of second language learning is increasingly occurring outside of institutional settings (Godwin-Jones, 2018). This is an emerging situation that a number of TELL (Technology Enhanced Language Learning) scholars have attempted to address with different terms and in various EFL contexts (Sauro & Zourou, 2019; Lee, 2019). However, research on TELL beyond the classroom remains scarce. Given the abundant opportunities this new learning mode presents and the complexity of the situation, questions have become pressing (Lai, 2017). Responding to this need, the edited volume *Enhancements and Limitations to ICT-based Informal Language Learning: Emerging Research and Opportunities* joins this relatively new line of research by providing an updated understanding of technology-enhanced informal language learning across different countries. By delving into the unique learning opportunities and learner perceptions of this particular mode of learning, the chapters in the volume offer inspirational ideas to bridge or narrow the gap between formal and informal language learning.

Structurally, the book comprises eight chapters with a preface and introduction. While the preface and introduction offer an overview of the book, the other eight chapters are divided into two sections. Chapter 1–3 form Section I, which presents theoretical accounts of the conceptualization of overall learning, mobile assisted informal language learning, and informal assessment. Section II, composed of the remaining five chapters, provides empirical studies in which contributors dig into learners' perception and experiences of ICT-based informal language learning through surveys and interviews.

After an overview of the topics, authors, and organization of the book by the editors, Derbel's introduction offers further elaboration on the book's background, layout, and significance. In chapter 1, Abdu Al-kadi examines how ICT-based informal practices have broadened the learning ecology and contributed to learners' overall proficiency. Providing the theoretical basis of the entire book, he

demonstrates how informal learning can complement and enhance formal learning. He further argues for situating it in the context of overall learning and for the fusion of two modes. Moreover, he explains how learners' linguistic gains from ICT-based informal language learning has become *missing proficiency* or *neglected proficiency* and highlights the importance of English varieties when it comes to measure learners' real proficiency in the digital age. In conclusion, he calls for the formal recognition of informal language learning and underscores that the two modes of learning need to complement one another in an inspiring way.

Aiming to raise awareness of mobile assisted language learning (MALL) tools in informal settings, Şendurur in chapter 2 discusses the issue of closing the gap between formal and informal usage of MALL tools, and how the omnipresence of mobile devices can afford informal learning. Showing how students favor language learning mobile apps under Web 2.0 and cloud technology, he elucidates the current issues surrounding MALL in terms of pedagogy, design, and technical aspects from the perspective of user experience. This chapter offers valuable guidelines for practitioners and is extremely useful to those interested in mobile assisted informal language learning.

In chapter 3, Hezam explores the impediments to measuring ICT-based informal English learning outcomes and offers valuable suggestions on assessing learners' overall language proficiency. Echoing Al-kadi's *missing proficiency* in chapter 1, he provides a thorough discussion of measuring obstructions within a wider overview of the informal learning paradigm. Problems and challenges like lack of recognition, lack of method, and linguistic concerns are detailed. He suggests that a range of competency-based, multiple-method, and other formative assessment approaches might offer solutions for ICT-based informal language learning and he cautions against the use of traditional standardized proficiency tests. Overall, Hezam appears confident that the impediments could be overcome once there is more formal recognition of informal learning.

Ahmed in chapter 4 investigates the use and benefits of social media services (SMSs) in informal English, pointing out that the popularity of SMSs among students and across geographic locations and cultures offers access to authentic materials and opportunities for autonomous learning. Focusing on the use of three SMSs (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp) by 60 Yemeni college students, he supports the view that SMSs can serve as productive venues for self-initiated learning practices and concludes that teachers should embrace the potential of SMSs and integrate SMSs-based informal language learning into classroom learning.

In chapter 5, Kılıçkaya examines language learners' informal use of applications and websites to assess their own English proficiency and performance. Pointing out that the formative assessment is an effective tool that is often neglected, the author argues that ICT applications and websites provide learners opportunities and resources to conduct formative assessment by themselves. Data elicited from surveys and interviews confirms that informal self-assessment is useful and beneficial and also indicates that participants need the resources and training to practice self-assessment. To this end, Kılıçkaya highlights that teachers should provide support and guidance on how to select reliable learning resources and how to use these resources in informal settings.

Korucu-Kis in chapter 6 looks into EFL learners' out-of-class ICT-enabled self-regulated learning arguing for a close relationship between the two. The author presents a survey of 78 college students highlighting the need to raise learner awareness of self-regulated informal learning, underlines the key role of teachers in bridging in-class and out-of-class learning, and suggests that ICT-based self-regulated learning be taken into consideration in higher education curricula. Additionally, Korucu-Kis implies the need for learners to engage in higher-order thinking skills in informal contexts.

Complementing chapter 2, in chapter 7 author Alotumi investigates college students' perception of informal learning through MALL with an exploratory survey of student readiness. Interpreted through a technology acceptance model, results indicate that most respondents perceive both perceived use and perceived ease of use positively. Pointing out that readiness paves the way for the integration of MALL

into formal EFL learning, Alotumi highlights the need for policy makers and curriculum designers to tap into the potential of MALL.

Although there is tremendous potential for informal CALL, still some scholars caution that the materials and websites learners use may not reflect accepted principles of language teaching and learning. Adopting a hermeneutical phenomenological approach, the authors in chapter 8 conducted a theme analysis of four in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and found that informal CALL would benefit from the principled integration of behaviorist, cognitive, and constructivist CALL elements.

As the recent growth of information and communication technologies have enlivened informal language learning, this book is a timely publication and offers several important insights. One salient point it brings to the fore is the need to situate informal language learning in the context of overall learning, increasing its value by interconnecting it with formal learning. To this end, the editors and contributors call for the formal recognition of informal language learning and highlight the importance of “formalizing the informal learning”(p. 167) via digital technology. Another strength of the book is that it highlights different varieties of English in informal learning contexts. As English has become a major language of the Internet, there are more users than ever before of varieties that are not standard British or American English, to which ICT-based language learners are exposed. The authors in the volume suggest that the traditional classification of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) in language education has been outdated, as new terms like English as an International Language (EIL), English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), and World Englishes are gradually gaining currency in international community. Thirdly, the book proposes using competency-based multiple-method approaches to assess learners’ ICT-based informal language uptake. Because the linguistic map of English language students learning online have changed, the proficiency test should be adjusted accordingly. The volume demonstrates that traditional standard tests based on native speaker proficiency is not suitable for gauging ICT-based language proficiency, and a wide range of alternative assessment tools are suggested. Finally, the book enriches existing research on informal language learning across contexts. Five empirical studies report findings from four different countries, which include under-developed countries like Turkey, Yemen, and Malaysia as well as the relatively wealthy Saudi Arabia. This contributes to our understanding of ICT-based informal learning in various EFL settings.

However, there are a few limitations. One is that most of the empirical studies in the volume employ cross-sectional methods with relatively small sample sizes, reporting the findings with descriptive statistics. While it serves the book’s intended role as “a good starting-point” (p. xxiv), it might affect generalization of the findings to other contexts. In the future, longitudinal and experimental studies with larger samples would be welcome. Another limitation is the lack of additional reading suggestions and key term definitions in some chapters; these are presented in chapters 2, 5, 6, and 7, but absent in chapters 1, 3, 4, and 8. They are important for readers interested in further understanding of the topics, in particular newcomers to the field, and they would add structural consistency.

On the whole, the book is a valuable addition to the current scholarship on informal language learning. It delves into ICT-enabled language learning opportunities and presents illuminating ideas on enlarged language learning ecologies, new language learning venues, and informal language assessment tools. Besides illuminating these emerging opportunities, however, the authors don’t shy away from challenges and limitations, rising to the challenges and suggesting several insightful and feasible solutions. All of the authors embrace the position that the best way to capitalize on these opportunities is to bridge or close the gap pedagogically between in-class and out-of-class language learning. The book is therefore particularly well suited to language teachers, instructional course designers, and researchers interested in these possibilities.

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