12 Informal learning activities for learners of English and for learners of Dutch

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate and compare the informal learning activities which French-speaking higher education students in Brussels engage in while learning English and Dutch. The informal learning of English was investigated in 2012, while the informal learning of Dutch was studied in 2015 and then compared to the informal learning of English. The outcomes of this study highlight the importance of raising students' awareness of their informal learning and of raising teachers' awareness of what students do to enhance informal language learning. Teachers may then encourage informal learning by suggesting appropriate materials and methods. The study gives an insight into informal language learning within a formal learning system and the importance of recognising its role therein.

Keywords: English language, Dutch language, informal learning, Brussels.

1. Introduction

This article examines the informal learning of English and Dutch by students at the Institut des Hautes Etudes des Communications Sociales (IHECS), a Higher Education (HE) institution for Communication in Brussels. The aim is to establish what informal language learning activities students engage in and

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How to cite this chapter: Van Marsenille, A. (2017). Informal learning activities for learners of English and for learners of Dutch. In Q. Kan & S. Bax (Eds), *Beyond the language classroom: researching MOOCs and other innovations* (pp. 141-152). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.mooc2016.677

whether the activities differ depending on the learning of English or Dutch. Having first carried out the investigation related to the informal learning of English, I was curious to know if the same activities were used by learners of Dutch. The informal learning of English was investigated in 2012, the informal learning of Dutch was studied in 2015 and then compared to the informal learning of English.

Coffield (2000) observes that although learning is often associated with formal learning institutions, most people tend to learn on an informal basis. He claims that informal learning is as important as formal learning and that it is "fundamental, necessary and valuable in its own right" (p. 8). The Communication from the European Commission (2001, pp. 32-33) differentiates between formal and informal learning. Formal learning is provided by an institution, is structured, and leads to certification. Informal learning results from daily life activities, is not structured and does not lead to certification.

> "As Golding, Brown, and Foley (2008) state, informal language learning has been less examined than formal learning, because it involves many variables. [As] it is not systematic, not organised by an institution and […] is determined by the student, it is harder to identify. […] Being a language teacher and a language learner myself, I notice that much language learning is done outside class" (Van Marsenille, 2015, pp. 9-10).

This investigation studies the views and behaviour of the students at IHECS, a HE institution in Brussels, which is a French/Dutch bilingual city. IHECS offers Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Communication and is a French-medium institution. The learners study Dutch as a second language and English as a foreign language. Dutch is studied as a second language by those for whom it is not the students' mother tongue, but it is a national language of Belgium and one of the official languages in Brussels; English as a foreign language is studied because it is important in the international context and because of the political position of Brussels (Gunderson, D'Silva, & Odo, 2013). In terms of context, the learning of both English and Dutch is important in Belgium, but the situation of each language is very different. English is learnt as an international language,

whereas Dutch is learnt as a national language. There is much more material available for learning English as it is studied all over the world, but there are more opportunities to find people speaking Dutch rather than English as their native language in Brussels.

The subdivision of Belgium has an impact on language learning (McGlue, 2003). Belgium is divided into three linguistic communities (French, Flemish, and German) and three regions (the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region, and Brussels-Capital). The Flemish region is officially Dutch-speaking, the Walloon Region mostly French-speaking with a small German-speaking area, and Brussels-Capital is officially bilingual French-Dutch. In Brussels, Dutch is taught as a second language and English as a foreign language.

This study has relevance for students in raising awareness of the importance of informal learning and how it may complement and support formal programmes. It also has relevance for teachers in raising awareness of the activities engaged in by the students in an informal context.

2. Theoretical framework

In this study, I use the definitions given by the European Commission (2001) to examine informal learning, then I look at the context of the informal learning activities related to the learning of English and the learning of Dutch in order to compare one with the other and to relate them to formal learning. The European Commission (2001) differentiates between three types of learning:

> "formal learning that is typically provided by an education or training institution, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and that is leading to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.
>
> Informal learning that results 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 typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or 'incidental'/random).
>
> Non-formal learning that is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective" (pp. 32-33).

In this study, non-formal learning is not considered. My focus is on informal learning as opposed to formal learning. This difference between formal and informal learning is important as the students involved in this study were taking a formal learning programme. The informal learning activities students engaged in outside their formal programme were investigated because informal learning, which is an important part of language learning, has been less studied than formal learning (Coffield, 2000). As mentioned in Van Marsenille (2015),

> "[a]s far as the location of the learning is concerned, Mahoney (2001) emphasises the fact that formal learning is associated with institutions and focuses on the product or result, whereas informal learning lays the emphasis on the learning process. […] Informal learning can occur in many different places: at home, at the pub, at the cinema, [or anywhere thanks to the use of mobile devices (Kukulska-Hulme, 2015)]" (p. 27).

The Web can offer the possibility of combining informal and formal learning. Learners watch a lot of TV series on the Internet; the series could be discussed and analysed in class with the teacher or in social media, but some learners prefer their teacher not to interfere in their informal world (Chik & Briedbach, 2014). Chik and Briedbach (2014, p. 113) notices that students use Internet regularly, they also observe that Hong Kong and German students are reading blogs, setting up closed-group learning related Facebook accounts and watching the same TV series.

3. Research questions

The purpose of this study is therefore to investigate which activities students engage in outside the formal setting when learning English and Dutch through the following research questions:

- What type of informal activities do learners of English and Dutch engage in for language learning?

- What are the differences and similarities between learners of English and learners of Dutch in their informal learning activities?

4. Method

4.1. Research participants

In the first part of the study in 2012, 80 students from four classes (20 from each class, two classes in the second year and two classes in the third year) were invited to complete a questionnaire related to the informal learning of English. In the second part of the study in 2015, 80 different students from four classes (same number per class and same year groups as above) completed the same questionnaire about informal learning of Dutch. This number of participants represents one-fifth of the active student population for both the second and the third year for each language cohort. Two-thirds of the participants in the sample were female, which was representative of the student population at IHECS. They were between 20 and 22 years old. The main reason for choosing these two year groups is that in the second and third year, students are learning general vocabulary and grammar of the foreign and second language.

4.2. Data collection and analysis

A questionnaire was used in order to collect quantitative data regarding participants' background and informal activities for language learning. As all the

participants' first language was French, the questionnaire was given in French to avoid potential misunderstandings. The questionnaire includes alternative sections which were used in the first and second part of the study depending on whether participants were studying English or Dutch[2].

The data from the questionnaires were analysed by creating a spreadsheet in Excel for the different responses related to the themes in the questionnaire. For each informal activity, the participants were asked to indicate the frequency by choosing 'Very often', 'Often', 'Occasionally' or 'Never'. The percentage frequency was calculated for each informal learning activity. Comparisons of frequencies were made between learners of English and Dutch.

5. Findings

The numbers in brackets show the actual number of responses out of the total (80 from learners of English, 80 from learners of Dutch). The findings will be presented after the table.

Table 1. Informal learning activities for learners of English (*N*=80) and Dutch (*N*=80)

Informal learning	**in ENGLISH**				**in DUTCH**			
	Very often	Often	Occasionally	Never	Very often	Often	Occasionally	Never
No 1. reading newspaper and/or magazine articles	10% (8)	31% (25)	53% (42)	6% (5)	4% (3)	20% (16)	58% (46)	18% (15)
No 2. reading books	4% (3)	14% (11)	64% (51)	18% (14)	0% (0)	2% (2)	20% (16)	78% (62)
No 3. reading webpages (e.g. blogs, reports)	30% (24)	38% (30)	29% (23)	4% (3)	4% (3)	26% (21)	52% (42)	18% (14)
No 4. watching local television programmes	23% (18)	15% (12)	31% (25)	31% (25)	10% (8)	12% (10)	50% (40)	28% (22)

2. English versions of the full questionnaires are available from the author.

No 5. watching films and/or TV series online	58% (46)	35% (28)	8% (6)	0% (0)	2% (2)	8% (6)	36% (29)	54% (43)
No 6. watching documentaries	11% (9)	21% (17)	36% (29)	31% (25)	2% (2)	2% (2)	32% (25)	64% (51)
No 7. listening to the radio	1% (1)	3% (2)	26% (21)	70% (56)	12% (10)	18% (14)	42% (34)	30% (24)
No 8. writing to students and/or penfriend	10% (8)	11% (9)	19% (15)	60% (48)	0% (0)	12% (10)	26% (21)	62% (49)
No 9. writing on the web	18% (14)	16% (13)	36% (29)	30% (24)	4% (3)	6% (5)	28% (22)	62% (50)
No 10. speaking to English-speaking people/Dutch-speaking people in Brussels	8% (6)	8% (6)	61% (49)	23% (19)	10% (8)	20% (16)	60% (48)	10% (8)
No 11. speaking to English-speaking people in other countries	16% (13)	39% (31)	40% (32)	5% (4)	-	-	-	-
No 12. going to Flanders (Dutch-speaking Northern region of Belgium)	-	-	-	-	12% (10)	16% (13)	62% (50)	10% (8)
No 13. going to the Netherlands	-	-	-	-	4% (3)	10% (8)	68% (55)	18% (14)
No 14. participating in cultural events	0% (0)	6% (5)	34% (27)	60% (48)	-	-	-	-
No 15. going to Flemish events	-	-	-	-	2% (1)	8% (6)	42% (33)	50% (40)
No 16. going to events with Dutch-speaking people	-	-	-	-	2% (2)	12% (10)	32% (25)	54% (43)
No 17. going to the pub and speaking Dutch	-	-	-	-	2% (2)	6% (5)	26% (21)	66% (52)

5.1. Similarities

Looking at the similarities in the learning of English and Dutch, the results suggest that students learning English and Dutch tend to engage in the following informal learning activities: a little over 50% of the participants for both groups occasionally read newspapers and magazines (No 1); and 60% for both groups occasionally speak to English-speaking people or Dutch-speaking people in Brussels (No 10). Regarding writing to students and/or penfriends, a high

proportion of participants (over 60%) in both languages never engage in this activity.

5.2. Differences

The main differences between the activities for students of English and Dutch are:

- 93% of the participants learning English watch films and TV series (mainly online) outside class (No 5) and 64% occasionally read books (No 2), but 54% of participants learning Dutch never watch films and/or TV series (No 5), and 78% of participants learning Dutch never read books (No 2). It is because there is a large offer of films, TV series and books in English, but for Dutch the offer is limited. Another explanation might be that students read Internet pages; traditional paper books are not so popular nowadays.

- 70% of participants learning English never listen to the radio (No 7), whereas this is the case for only 30% of participants learning Dutch (No 7). Nowadays, students would rather listen to podcasts or audio clips instead of radio programmes. This is probably the reason why 70% of the learners of English never listen to the radio and 30% of the learners of Dutch never listen to radio programmes.

- More participants learning Dutch (50%) than those learning English (31%) occasionally watch local television programmes (No 4). In Belgium, there is a larger offer of Flemish (national) television and radio programmes than of English language programmes.

- It is natural that speaking to people and participating in cultural events is done more by students learning Dutch as they can take advantage of the surrounding environment. It is also easier for students learning Dutch than for students learning English to go to the neighbouring region or country and speak the language; indeed, there is no neighbouring

country where students could speak English with the locals. 62% of students learning Dutch occasionally go to Flanders (No 12) and 68% of students learning Dutch occasionally go to the Netherlands (No 13). Although English is spoken in many countries as a national language or as a lingua franca, the countries where English is spoken are further from Brussels than the places where Dutch is spoken; it requires more effort to go to English-speaking countries.

6. Discussion of the findings

This article has shed light on how students learn informally and on how this may differ according to the language the students are learning. As far as I am aware, there has not been another study comparing English learners with Dutch learners in terms of informal activities for language learning set in a higher education institution in Brussels.

In line with Van Marsenille (2015), this study has shown that students of English spend quite a lot of time watching films and TV series in English. Watching films and TV series on the Internet is a popular activity for young people nowadays. Belgian students watch the same TV series as other students from different countries in the world do and they share their views about them on the Internet (Chik & Briedbach, 2014). These widespread TV series and movies offer material to learn English and to discuss in English with people around the world. My data suggests that students do that very often.

As far as the learning of Dutch is concerned, only 8% of participants often watch films in Dutch (No 5). This is because the offer in Dutch is limited. Dutch is a local language, whereas English is an international language.

As far as location is concerned, informal learning can occur in different places (Lafraya, 2012, p. 11). Learners of English tend to engage in activities for English learning on an informal basis mostly through the Internet, 58% of participants learning English very often watch films and TV series on the

Internet (No 5); whereas students of Dutch participate more in real-life activities, 20% of participants learning Dutch often speak to locals in Brussels and 60% of participants learning Dutch occasionally do so (No 10).

Young language learners in general use the Internet very often and also for other purposes (Chik & Briedbach, 2014): they listen to music, they read blogs – 38% of participants learning English often do so and 52% of participants learning Dutch occasionally do so (No3).

54% of participants learning Dutch never go to events with Dutch-speaking people in Brussels (No 16). It is probably because they have opportunities to meet Dutch-speaking people (20% often speak to Dutch-speaking people), as Brussels is bilingual French and Dutch. Flanders and the Netherlands are close to Brussels. Learners of Dutch do not use the opportunities they have close to the place they study to their full extent, especially as they do not often take part in events in Dutch. They do not make full use of 'the world as a classroom' (Coleman & Baumann, 2005).

As discussed in Van Marsenille (2015), "this investigation should help […] raise awareness of some of the informal learning activities [engaged in] by HE language students, so that teachers can take them into account in their formal learning [context]" (p. 165). If teachers know what students do outside class as far as the learning of the language is concerned, they may link this to activities in class so as to motivate students to learn more on an informal basis. This can help bridge the gap between both types of learning and give importance to informal learning, which should be recognised as being as important as formal learning, as Coffield (2000) stated.

7. Conclusion

Currently, there appears to be a gap between informal and formal learning because class activities, such as reading and discussing a newspaper article or listening to the news, are not directly related to the student's informal learning activities.

At the IHECS where I am currently teaching, teachers report that they do not know much about their students' informal learning activities and that they do not consider discussing them in the formal class. As stated elsewhere, "[i]f students and teachers [knew] more about the different informal learning activities [available to learners], they could make better use of them; the activities could be taken into account in the formal learning programme" (Van Marsenille, 2015, p. 182).

A limitation of this study is that the reasons for engaging in the informal learning activities were not explored. This investigation will be followed up by interviews to further investigate informal learning activities and the reasons for engaging in them.

The study nevertheless gives an insight into informal language learning adjacent to a formal learning system and the importance of recognising its role. The data indicates that students engage in a wide range of informal activities to support their language learning. Although teachers in the formal learning framework can help the student learn on an informal basis, some learners may not want their teacher to interfere in their informal world. They prefer to create their own Facebook group (Chik & Briedbach, 2014) without the guidance of the teacher. So how can teachers support informal language learning without students feeling that their space is being invaded? Further research will be needed to help us better understand the teacher's role in informal settings as well as formal settings.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
Dublin, Ireland; Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

Beyond the language classroom: researching MOOCs and other innovations
Edited by Kan Qian and Stephen Bax

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design and cover photos by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-52-0 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-53-7 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-54-4 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

Legal deposit, Ireland: The National Library of Ireland, The Library of Trinity College, The Library of the University of Limerick, The Library of Dublin City University, The Library of NUI Cork, The Library of NUI Maynooth, The Library of University College Dublin, The Library of NUI Galway.

Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: juin 2017.