1 Integrating informal learning into formal language education: an introduction

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1.   Introduction

This volume collects selected papers from the 2017 Innovative Language Teaching and Learning at University conference (InnoConf), which took place on the 16th of June at The Open University. The theme of the conference was *Integrating informal learning into formal language education*. The aim of the conference was to engage in productive collaboration between language professionals to further equip students to succeed in our ever-growing landscape of formal and informal learning. Given the unprecedented amount of online resources and communities available to language learners, the conference focussed on exploring how language teachers are integrating these opportunities into their settings.

This is the third volume in a series of books compiling papers from the InnoConf conferences. It follows from the first two volumes in 2015 and 2016 respectively: *Enhancing participation and collaboration* (Goria, Speicher, & Stollhans, 2016) and *Enhancing employability* (Álvarez-Mayo, Gallagher-Brett, & Michel, 2017).

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2.   InnoConf 17

The InnoConf 17 conference was hosted by the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics, and we were welcomed by Dr Regine Hampel, Professor of Open and Distance Language Learning and Associate Dean (Research & Scholarship) at the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education, and Language Studies at the Open University. Our first Keynote came from Dr Shannon Sauro, Associate Professor in the Department of Culture, Languages, and Media at Malmö University, Sweden. Her presentation, entitled *The Innovative and Creative Informal Language Learning of Fans*, explored the integration of fan practices into the university classroom to support language and literary learning.

The parallel presentations throughout the day introduced/displayed thought-provoking contributions from language teachers, researchers, and practitioners from different contexts in terms of languages taught, methodological approaches and pedagogical aims. The topics covered a large range of informal and formal learning initiatives for language learning, including the use of Whatsapp, language-learning mobile apps, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), flipped learning, user-generated videos, intercultural exchanges and online immersion, collaborative writing, feedback, tandem learning, e-portfolios, and preparation for the year abroad.

The closing plenary followed a new format: conference organiser Tita Beaven conversed with Richard Simcott, a language consultant and life-long language learner who is a key player in the international polyglot movement, and one of the organisers of the Polyglot Conference. This format was well received by the conference participants and provided an engaging close to the day. Their conversation is captured in the final chapter of this book.

As well as the formal activities, it was a pleasure to have the opportunity to make new acquaintances, see 'old' faces, and engage in discussions on the many topics presented throughout the day. Social media (from the @Innoconf Twitter account and others) helped keep those who could not make it in person informed of the highlights of the day, as the #Innoconf17 led to interesting contributions and engagement.

3.   Theme

The theme of the conference was *Integrating informal learning into formal language education*. Web technologies have enabled learners to access teaching materials outside the boundaries of the classroom. Whether through desktop computers or mobile devices, the wealth of resources available has multiplied in the last few years, allowing learners to access learning objects at their convenience. At the same time, "learning has become increasingly self-directed and often occurs away from schools and other formal educational settings" (Song & Lee, 2014, p. 511). As contact time with students is increasingly reduced in higher education, teachers are looking at ways to support their students with resources that can be used outside the classroom. This means that many teachers are looking at approaches such as *flipping* the classroom, designed to free up time in class to concentrate on activities that foster interaction by enabling students to engage independently with tasks which do not require supervision, such as completing grammar drilling exercises or using authentic materials (text, audio, video) – in the case of languages. Other initiatives include the use of social media to access resources or interact with peers or native speakers, telecollaboration activities between learners in different countries, or the co-creation of learning artefacts such as videos, websites, or texts.

The incorporation of such activities into the curriculum blurs the boundaries between formal and informal activity, and as conference organisers, we wanted to bring this theme to the fore at InnoConf 17.

4.   Organisation of the book and chapter overview

4.1.   Learning collaboratively online: attitudes, motivation, and learning communities

The first section of the book is entitled *Learning collaboratively online: attitudes, motivation, and learning communities*. Under this heading, we find four chapters that expand our knowledge of how learners feel about the use of

different types of software for language learning purposes across formal, semi-formal, and informal contexts. **Bárkányi** ponders the assumed informal nature of learning through Language MOOCs (LMOOCs) and whether learners perceive participating in activities in such environments as an informal activity with a lesser degree of performance anxiety or not. Through a large-scale study of LMOOC learners, she finds very positive attitudes, but also a certain degree of anxiety. Within a more formal context, **Martínez-Carrasco** presents his findings from a study into the use of Wikis for L2 collaborative writing by 103 learners from Spain. As well as positive results in terms of language acquisition and impressions from the learners, his study also reports improvements in terms of collaboration and socialisation among students. The third chapter moves to another type of software: **Saona-Vallejos** examines how a range of students across different language levels rate the *busuu* language learning mobile application, focussing on its features, design, and social aspects. In addition, he carried out tests on written and oral skill improvements and concludes that the vast majority of participants had improved in their written performance, but not their oral skills. Closing this section, **Wang** describes the results of his research into tandem learning exchanges. The participants in his study perceive their participation in the exchanges as a useful complement to classroom learning, as well as appreciating the opportunities for interpersonal communication and developing cultural awareness through these – however, participation was low and Wang considers the implications of his approach for future research.

4.2.   Testing and evaluating language learning tools

This second section of the book, *Testing and evaluating language learning tools*, focusses on the evaluation of innovative technologies and resources in a range of settings. **Cervi-Wilson** and **Brick** used *ImparApp*, a location-based game designed for mobile devices, to extend their students' language learning beyond the classroom. They present the design of the app activities, which take the students around the city they study in to discover its roman past, and the results of their first evaluation. **Mericka** also reports on a study which saw her students going out of the classroom to extend their learning. The students worked

collaboratively to create LipDub videos based on German songs. Although the videos were different from what the author expected, they were later used as resources for further learning in class and her participants rated the activities positively. **Chen** developed a series of videos to support her students' Chinese studies using a flipped classroom approach. The videos covered grammar rules, vocabulary use, and explanation of texts, and students could watch them before or after class. The students who used the videos showed a preference for grammar videos and Chen discusses the implications of her study for further design of resources and management of flipped classroom activities. **Salin** introduces the *Better French Living Project,* an initiative to prepare students for their year abroad by developing their practical and intercultural knowledge as well as enhancing their listening skills outside the classroom. The resources selected for the project helped students deal with some practical challenges, such as securing accommodation or opening a bank account, as well as introducing topics such as cultural differences and stereotyping. Her students rated the resources and activities related to them positively and the author suggests further research is needed to evaluate their impact after the students return from their stays abroad. **Vacas Matos** offers her perspective from a formal setting. Her students engaged with native speakers to create a series of videos to feed into a multimodal corpus of informal speech acts in Spanish to teach pragmatics. The results show that, although participants had different levels in terms of language level, there were no differences in their pragmatic behaviour. The author concludes with a series of suggestions for further use of the corpus to teach pragmatics in the foreign language classroom. Finally, **Rosell-Aguilar** presents an overview of the identified potential of Twitter as a language learning tool and the evidence found so far to support its use. Although research so far has focussed on initiatives carried out in formal settings, the author argues for further research in informal contexts.

4.3.   The polyglot community: an interview with Richard Simcott

This final section records the second keynote from InnoConf 17. **Beaven** and **Simcott** had an engaging conversation about plurilingualism, language teaching and learning in the context of the changing technological landscape,

and the development of new communities and networks to support learning 'in the wild'.

5.   Conclusion

The chapters in this book provide insights into many types of innovative approaches to teaching languages at university and beyond. The contributing authors have experimented with new strategies to enrich their students' learning experience or identified new ways of using existing resources in and outside the classroom. The experiences reported and evaluated in the book are by no means exhaustive, and much work continues to be undertaken by language professionals everywhere. InnoConf 18 and further InnoConf conferences will continue to explore these themes and offer opportunities for language professionals to share ideas, resources, successes, and failures with the goal of improving our practice. That is a mission worth sharing.

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