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INTEGRATING INFORMAL DIGITAL LANGUAGE LEARNING INTO FORMAL CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

Abstract. The paper explores approaches to integrating informal digital language learning (IDLL) into formal instruction, emphasizing their complementary role in developing learner autonomy and communicative competence. It examines structured integration models, including learning journals, project-based learning and virtual language exchanges, while highlighting the teacher's role in facilitating self-directed learning. The study identifies key assessment challenges, including the formalizing paradox, limitations of traditional assessment tools, unequal digital access and concerns about validity. It concludes that effective integration requires reliable assessment tools, enhanced teacher competencies and institutional mechanisms for recognizing informal and non-formal learning outcomes.

Keywords: informal digital language learning, formal instruction, social networks, quantitative methods, qualitative methods, informal learning outcomes.

Foreign language acquisition takes place in both formal educational settings and informal environments, such as digital media, online communities, computer games, social interactions and travel. While formal instruction provides structured guidance and systematic practice, informal learning promotes autonomy, authentic communication and meaningful language use. However, integrating informal learning experiences into formal curricula remains inconsistent due to limited methodological guidance, cultural expectations, curricular traditions and institutional requirements. Exploring effective ways to connect these learning environments is essential for enhancing foreign language education and preparing teachers to support learners' autonomous and lifelong language development.

This paper examines contemporary research on informal foreign language learning, with particular attention to Informal Digital Language Learning (IDLL), learner autonomy, pedagogical integration, assessment practices and cross-cultural differences. It also considers approaches adopted in American higher education and the Ukrainian educational context, identifying opportunities and challenges for developing effective integration strategies.

Contemporary research increasingly focuses on IDLL, defined as language acquisition occurring autonomously in digital environments outside formal instruction (Lee et al., 2021). IDLL encompasses receptive activities, such as watching foreign-language videos, streaming films and consuming social media content, as well as productive activities, including commenting on online publications, participating in digital communities and communicating through online games (Toffoli et al., 2023).

Research indicates that the diversity and quality of informal learning activities may be more closely associated with vocabulary development and language proficiency than the amount of time learners spend on them. Combining meaning-focused activities, such as watching films, with form-focused practices, including language-learning applications, can provide complementary opportunities for acquisition. Emerging technologies, including AI chatbots, may further enrich informal learning by supporting receptive skills and enabling additional language practice (Toffoli et al., 2023).

Psychological factors significantly influence informal learning outcomes. Flow Theory suggests that learners become deeply engaged when an activity offers an appropriate balance between their abilities and the challenges involved. Such engagement can strengthen enjoyment, persistence and learning effectiveness. IDLL may enhance online self-efficacy and digital competence, contributing to academic success (Barkati et al., 2024).

Motivation and social interaction are equally important. Instrumental motivation, such as learning a language for employment or travel, and personal interest in the language have been identified as important predictors of proficiency development through informal learning (Truong, 2021; Ghafar, 2023). The density of learners' social networks involving foreign-language speakers can also contribute to language mastery (Malerba, 2012). These findings indicate that successful informal learning depends not merely on access to digital resources but also on meaningful engagement, motivation, interaction and learner agency.

Recent research increasingly conceptualizes formal and informal learning as interconnected components of a continuous learning process rather than separate educational domains. Within this perspective, teachers are expected to facilitate learners' engagement with authentic language resources while providing affective, cognitive and behavioural support. Explicitly acknowledging students' out-of-class activities can increase engagement, create opportunities for practical communication and support the development of autonomy (Rezai et al., 2024).

American higher education provides examples of structured approaches to integrating informal learning into foreign-language curricula. One approach involves the formal recognition of learners' existing digital practices. Instructors conduct curriculum audits or surveys to identify students' interests and language-related activities. Students subsequently maintain informal learning journals documenting their experiences, reflecting on their progress and connecting digital content with classroom objectives. Teachers can also develop contextualized assignments based on familiar media, such as identifying grammatical structures in online videos (Toffoli et al., 2023).

A second approach is Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL), which incorporates authentic external resources into extended academic tasks. For example, students preparing a travel guide may be required to consult video blogs, online

community discussions and other informal sources. Assessment considers both the final language product and students' reflections on how these resources contributed to their learning. This model encourages independent resource selection, critical reflection and metacognitive awareness (Hill, 2018).

A third approach involves language-exchange programmes and virtual tandem learning. Students interact with foreign-language speakers through online platforms and document their experiences in post-interaction reports. These reports may identify cultural encounters, newly acquired idiomatic expressions and communication strategies. Such activities connect formal learning objectives with authentic interaction and intercultural experience. Examples described by American University, Washington, D.C., illustrate how institutions can acknowledge and assess autonomous engagement beyond the classroom.

Although these approaches introduce accountability, their effectiveness depends on maintaining a balance between institutional expectations and learner independence. Rather than prescribing every activity, teachers should encourage learners to select relevant resources, establish personal goals and reflect on their experiences. The purpose of integration is not to transform every informal activity into a formal assignment, but to help students recognize and extend the educational value of their everyday language practices.

Evaluating the relationship between formal and informal learning requires methods capable of capturing both measurable outcomes and individual learning processes. Research increasingly employs mixed-methods designs that combine quantitative instruments with qualitative techniques (Barkati et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2021).

Quantitative assessment of learner autonomy typically involves self-report surveys, such as learner autonomy scales, which measure perceived abilities in goal-setting, self-management and reflection. Informal Learning Inventories, including IDLL inventories, can record the frequency of independent activities, such as watching foreign-language content or using language applications. These instruments provide comparable information about learners' perceptions and behavioural engagement (Lee et al., 2021).

Qualitative methods provide additional insight into the reasoning behind autonomous learning decisions. Reflective journals and diaries document learners' activities, motivations, resource choices and difficulties. Thematic analysis can reveal patterns in decision-making and perceptions of control. Semi-structured interviews similarly explore learners' beliefs about autonomy, motivation and the teacher's role, explaining aspects that numerical measurements cannot fully capture.

Informal learning outcomes can also be evaluated through a combination of objective testing and practical performance. Standardized proficiency tests, including vocabulary and reading assessments, can identify measurable development, while grammar and usage tests examine structural accuracy. Self-assessment instruments

capture perceived competence, confidence and willingness to communicate. Performance-based tasks, such as role-plays and presentations, provide evidence of communicative effectiveness, fluency and complexity in practical situations.

The combination of these methods is particularly important because informal learning may produce outcomes that traditional examinations fail to capture. Improvements in pragmatic competence, spontaneous communication, cultural understanding, and passive vocabulary knowledge may not be reflected adequately in grammar-focused tests. Thus, assessment should incorporate both linguistic accuracy and the broader communicative benefits associated with authentic language use.

Despite its pedagogical potential, integrating informal learning into formal education presents several methodological and ethical challenges. The first concerns the tension between authenticity and accountability. Informal learning is often voluntary, personally meaningful and unstructured. When teachers introduce mandatory viewing schedules, graded journals, or compulsory interaction reports, activities originally driven by intrinsic motivation may become external obligations. This phenomenon constitutes the *formalizing paradox*: institutional recognition may support learning while simultaneously undermining the spontaneity and enjoyment that make informal engagement valuable (Toffoli et al., 2023).

A second challenge concerns the validity of assessment. Traditional tests often emphasize discrete linguistic knowledge rather than the pragmatic, cultural and communicative outcomes associated with informal learning. Furthermore, because learners use different resources and follow individual learning trajectories, standardized assessment may not adequately reflect their experiences. Attributing improvements exclusively to informal activities is also difficult because learners simultaneously participate in formal instruction and other language-learning experiences.

Equity and access represent additional concerns. Differences in internet connectivity, device availability, access to paid platforms and available study time can affect opportunities for participation. Students with employment or caregiving responsibilities may have less time for informal engagement than their peers. Grading learners according to the frequency or duration of digital activities risks reinforcing existing inequalities.

Assessment reliability may also be compromised when reflective assignments evaluate writing or analytical skills rather than the quality of language-learning experiences. Teachers may lack the competencies necessary to assess autonomous learning effectively, highlighting the need for professional development that prepares educators to facilitate, guide and evaluate non-traditional learning processes (Lee et al., 2021).

Addressing these challenges requires flexible assessment criteria, alternative resource options and an emphasis on learning quality rather than quantity. Reflective assignments should complement, rather than replace, direct evidence of linguistic

development. Teachers should also distinguish between assessing participation, evaluating learning outcomes and supporting students' capacity for independent learning.

In Ukraine, integrating informal and formal language learning has gained particular importance because of digitalization, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the full-scale war. These circumstances have increased the practical significance of flexible learning arrangements and digital resources while creating additional challenges for educational continuity.

The Ukrainian Law on Education distinguishes formal education, non-formal education and informal learning. Formal education is associated with regulated educational qualifications, non-formal education involves organized learning outside the formal system, and informal learning occurs through everyday activities and self-directed experience. However, mechanisms for recognizing and validating informal learning outcomes remain under development.

Since 2022, higher and professional pre-higher education institutions have introduced internal procedures for recognizing learning outcomes obtained through non-formal and informal education. Examples include considering international language certificates in students' academic ratings and recognizing relevant learning achievements. Such procedures provide institutional incentives for autonomous learning and create opportunities to connect independently acquired competencies with formal educational progression.

Further development requires systematic institutional policies, appropriate assessment instruments and teacher preparation. Ukrainian universities could adapt the approaches used in American higher education by incorporating reflective learning journals, authentic project-based assignments and virtual language exchanges into existing curricula. However, implementation should account for differences in institutional resources, technological access, curricular requirements and learners' circumstances.

Conclusions. Informal foreign language learning has become an important component of contemporary language education, complementing formal instruction through authentic communication, learner autonomy, motivation and flexible access to linguistic resources. Research on IDLL indicates that the diversity and quality of learning activities may be more consequential than the amount of time spent on them. Motivation, social interaction, digital competence and psychological engagement further influence learning outcomes.

Effective integration requires institutions to recognize informal learning without eliminating its autonomous character. Learning journals, project-based assignments, and virtual language exchanges offer practical mechanisms for connecting everyday language experiences with formal educational objectives. Nevertheless, these approaches must address the formalizing paradox, assessment limitations, unequal

access, and the risk of evaluating learners' reflective or writing skills instead of their actual language development.

For Ukrainian higher education, the integration and recognition of informal learning represent opportunities to strengthen educational flexibility, communicative competence and lifelong learning. Achieving these objectives requires context-sensitive institutional policies, teacher professional development, equitable access to resources, and assessment practices that acknowledge diverse learning trajectories. Treating formal instruction and informal learning as complementary elements of a continuous process provides a promising foundation for more autonomous, inclusive, and effective foreign language education.

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