

RECONSIDERING THE RELATION BETWEEN THE FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract: *Learning English, but also education in general, cannot be conceived without taking into consideration the factors and the forces acting in the environment that individuals perform this activity. The interest of this paper is to highlight the special importance of the complementarity between formal and informal learning of the English language within the framework of the higher education curriculum. The fast paced development of emerging technologies or the Internet access, as well as students' positioning towards these phenomena, set tracks that need to be explored for an innovative approach of the teaching-learning system of the English language. What are the forms of transfer that students make between the formal and the informal context in order to accumulate learning competencies that are efficient and well-adapted to their personal needs?*

Keywords: *formal learning, informal learning, plurilingualism, learning strategies, complementarity.*

1. Studying foreign languages in the era of emerging technologies represents a challenge both for persons who are attending educational programs in certified institutions and for persons who are permanently in professional training. Plurilingualism gradually becomes a constant dimension in the school community but also outside education institutions. Educational activities cannot be conceived without taking into consideration the characteristics of the formal environment, school or university, as well as those of the informal environment, within the family or the circle of friends, in local, regional or virtual communities. The necessity of such an interdependent phenomenon is justified by the diversity of the linguistic demands on the labour market, the study of foreign languages having to be more open towards the environment in which the learning takes place.

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2. Presentation of context and defining notions

Strongly influenced by historical, political, economic and social events, the Romanian society has suffered many transformations and adaptations regarding the teaching and learning of foreign languages. The hegemonic language during the communist period, the Russian language, has gradually disappeared from schools curricula after 1989. This phenomenon is also explained by the absence of the informal learning of this language, the Russian being a compulsory subject only in the Romanian education units.

The English language has become the prominent communication method in the globalization era, playing an important role within the social and economic activities of various communities. It is the main language in international exchanges, it facilitates the governmental and non-governmental activities, and it has become a key factor in many forms of educational and cultural interaction.¹ Therefore, knowing English is more and more a part of the fundamental education of 21st century individuals. Thus, the English language is not merely an exchange method, but also a necessity that has become an essential component of the modern man's daily life.

On the other hand, the development of the English language, as well as that of the connected culture, is strongly supported by the status and the power of this language at an international level. Continuing Lev Vygotski's² historical-cultural theory, the ecological learning theory allows the reconsideration of the gap between the representations of the students and the teachers interacting in micro-contexts in which they place their learning experiences of the English language. What is to be kept in mind is that this relatively new process in the didactics of foreign languages does not dissociate learning into micro-contexts of learning within the macro-context that includes the last ones. Thus, the globalization macro-context, in which learning experiences take place, already has an impact that has been identified and correlated with learning the English language.³

¹ Grisham, T., «The Branding of English as a *Lingua Franca*» in J. Aden, T. Grimshaw & H.Penz (dir./eds.), *Enseigner les langues-cultures à l'ère de la complexité. Teaching Language in Culture in an Era of Complexity*. Brussels. P.I.E Peter Lang, Coll GramR, 2010, p. 259.

² Vygotsky, L., *Thought and Language*, Cambridge MA. MIT Press. 1986.

³ Kramsch C. «Post 9/11: Foreign languages between knowledge and power» in *Applied Linguistics* 26/4, 2005, p. 545-567; Aden J. «Entendre l'autre dans sa propre langue» In J. Aden (ed) *De Babel à la mondialisation*. Paris. Sceren, 2006, p.9-12.

The analysis of the context in which the learning of the English language takes place cannot be made without a first definition of the following concepts: *formal* and *informal*. According to the European Commission, formal learning is provided in educational institutions, having well-structured objectives, and being given adequate time and material. There are good intentions on the side of the learner and it ends with a diploma or certificate. Informal learning, on the other hand, is the result of daily activities, related to work, family life or free time, is not structured, without certification and without intention on the side of the learner.

The concept of plurilingualism was approached as early as 1997 in the analysis that prepared the current Common Reference European Framework for Languages. D. Coste, D. Moore and G. Zarate⁴ defined this notion as the competence to communicate linguistically and to interact on a cultural plan, the competence of a social actor who masters, at different levels, the experience of several cultures, and is capable of managing this linguistic and cultural asset. We can notice the great importance given to the relation between language and culture because the acquisition of a language cannot be conceived without taking into consideration the cultural aspect, the territory defined geographically, historically and culturally where this idiom socially manifests itself.

The plurilingual approach highlights the fact that, as the linguistic experience of an individual in their context extends from the language used at home to the language of communication of a social group, and then of other social groups, they do not differentiate these languages and cultures, but they develop a communicative competence, to whose structuring contribute all sorts of knowledge and linguistic experience. If the last decades would highlight the importance of knowing a foreign language at the highest level, the new European educational policies encourage and promote the linguistic diversity that each individual possess. Terms like mediation competence, linguistic repertoire or linguistic biography are more and more used within the framework of the new political structure, the European Union.

As a general notion, plurilingualism was completed at an educational level by the plurilinguistic competence. It is important that we highlight

⁴ Coste, D., Moore, D., Zarate, G., *Compétence plurilingue et pluriculturelle. Langues vivantes. Vers un Cadre Européen Commun de référence pour l'enseignement et l'apprentissage des langues vivantes, études préparatoires*. Strasbourg. Conseil de l'Europe. 1997.

that this new type of skill regards: the creation of a new European citizen, more flexible in thought, more tolerant and open-minded towards his fellow citizens; the establishment of a 'vivre –ensemble démocratique' (the new competence does not value only the individual, but the relations among individuals); a new discourse towards plurality of languages, identities and cultures.

We conclude by highlighting the fact that the formal and the informal learning of the English language must be approached in strong connection with the globalizing macro-context and the system of factors that influences the efficient learning strategies. The Romanian society gradually becomes plurilingual and multicultural: we are surrounded not only by minority languages, but also by new language-cultures developed as a result of the arrival of foreign investors.

3. Arguments in favour of a complementary vision on learning the English language in the higher education system

The formal learning of the English language in Romania comprises a wide range spectrum: optional courses for students to become familiar with the language at the kindergarten, compulsory courses starting with the 3rd grade till the end of high-school, as well as English for special purposes at university. And yet, the development of writing and speaking skills in the English language is not done merely in the formal context. This dimension is more pertinent with the learning of the English language at university because the students are motivated and have well-defined needs as compared to the pupils in high-school; the entire educational process of students is concentrated on a set of priorities and objectives that target a job, a position in the professional world. Therefore, the English language will not only limit itself to an isolated course at the university, but will represent the starting point for the application for a position on the labour market.

According to the theory of practice communities⁵ every person is part of a group with which shares things and practices, while through the interaction of its members different learning situations can emerge. Practising tennis, for example, implies a series of practices: learning rules, dialoguing with the coach, communicating with the other persons who participate, or watching a championship on TV or on the Internet. All

⁵ Lave, J. & E. Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 1991; Wenger, E. *La théorie des communautés de pratique*. Québec. Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2005.

these activities are common to a community of people who chose to practice this sport; the permanent interaction of the community members can lead or not to situations of partial or total learning, but, the majority, informal. At the same time, watching movies or listening to things in English can lead to the improvement of the language level of students.

The teacher must be aware that learning a language cannot be accomplished exclusively in the space of the course at the university. On the contrary, the educational process should be based on the data that the informal learning can provide for various reasons:

- the informal context represents an informational and cultural richness;
- outside the formal learning framework, the students can express their creativity better and learning is better adapted to their personal needs taking into consideration that the teachers' representations of what students should learn do not always coincide with what the latter need;
- the informal context faces the students with real life situations, not only simulated situations like in the case of formal learning framework;
- the unpredictability of the informal learning experiences demands an adaptation of the students' knowledge and competences, a dynamic and flexible cognitive process;
- the informal context represents the space in which students pass most of their lives; formal learning unfolds on a limited time segment, structured on educational cycles.

Our proposal is based on a global approach of the learning process of the English language, the environment factors being an extremely important variable. Starting from the fact that learning English is not isolated from the daily realities, the activity of the university teacher must be reshaped and must include the informal aspects of learning. Our intention is not to minimize the contribution of formal learning, but to support it through the exploitation of informal resources in students' lives. There are certain limits to informal learning:

- the necessity of a compelling selection of the data belonging to the informal context;
- the existence of some incompatibilities between the data provided by the formal and the informal context, the absence of solid learning strategies can lead to the appropriation of an structured knowledge system;
- the development of some partial competences.

Thus, learning and teaching foreign languages must have in view a complementarity between the information provided by the formal and the

informal learning. Having learning strategies, acquired and improved in the formal environment, students can approach the informal segment of their own learning in a conscious and responsible manner.

What would be the arguments that are at the basis of reconsidering the relation between in formal learning and the informal learning of the English language in the higher education system? Firstly, the awareness of learning is much higher at students than at pupils in the prior educational cycles, since they possess an extrinsic motivation that stands at the basis of their process of linguistic development and enrichment of the linguistic and cultural assets. Studying the English language at university is connected to the practical use of the language within the targeted professional activities.

Secondly, students have already acquired base strategies of learning the English language, their linguistic repertoire and the developed competences allowing them to appeal to the informal context and to the data it can provide. The modern era, characterized by a rapid development of emerging technologies, does not allow the stagnation of learning in a formal isolation. We learn more and more outside the university courses or outside the strategies adapted in order to face the divide that can appear between the formal and the informal learning.

In a recent report, *The Future of Learning: Preparing for Change*, they present the key notions for the restructuring of learning, namely: personalisation, collaboration and informalisation, with the meaning of informal learning, "The overall vision is that **personalisation**, **collaboration** and **informalisation** (informal learning) will be at the core of learning in the future. These terms are not new in education and training but they will become the central guiding principle for organising learning and teaching. The central learning paradigm is thus characterised by lifelong and life-wide learning and shaped by the ubiquity of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)."⁶

4. Provisional conclusions

Computer-assisted learning, learning by collaborating within the framework of formal and informal communities, as well as the on-going attention paid to the adaptation of learning to the needs and demands of the learners are major objectives of learning on short term basis and on

⁶ Redecker, C., M. Leis, M. Leendertse, Y. Punie, G. Gijsbers, P. Kirschner, S. Stoyanov & B. Hoogveld, *The Future of Learning: Preparing for Change*, 2011, p.9-10 (available at <http://ftp.jrc.es/EURdoc/JRC66836.pdf>).

long term basis. Therefore, taking into consideration the transformations at the level of the European educational policies, the higher education system must be flexible in creating open approaches towards the involvement of the informal learning context in the current curricula. These shuffles can be done with the help of the humans involved, teachers and students, and on the basis of real collaborations that want a learning focused especially on the linguistic and social needs of students.

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