**Book Review: The Handbook of Informal Language
Learning edited by Mark Dressman and
Randall William Sadler, Wiley-Blackwell 2020**

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Abstract

The informal language learning environment has been noted as one of the requirements of foreign/ second language learning success. Based on the current theory and empirical studies addressed in this book, this review provides a brief history and position of informal language learning within the field of EFL/ ESL. The review also examines the strength and limitations of this volume.

Keywords: book review, informal language learning

The Handbook of Informal Language Learning, written and edited by Mark Dressman and Randall William Sadler, published by Wiley, Blackwell, is aimed at language learners, teachers, and researchers interested in language learning opportunities in an informal environment. Informal language learning can be traced back to Krashen's (1976) notion of 'natural/ informal linguistic environment,' followed by Benson's (2011) 'formality' concept (non-formal and informal dimension) of language learning beyond the classroom. Although Krashen and Benson have acknowledged the informal environment as a determinant factor in language learning success, relatively less literature focuses on this topic. Only 5% of the literature in the top ten rated journals of language education in the last two years focuses on informal language learning (Reinders, 2020). Therefore, this book volume fills this gap by providing a clear theorization of the field and examining a wide range of related topics of informal learning such as autonomy and self-access learning. The authors contend that technology and globalization have shifted language learners "from near-total dependence on the knowledge and expertise and planning of others to a level of autonomy and opportunity for self-teaching and "picking up" new languages ..." (p. 1). This assertion is evidenced by findings in the book volume showing how the interrelation between digital communication and learners'

autonomy determines informal language learning participation and how self-access learning resources create a unique informal learning ecology.

Part one, *Theorizing Informal Language Learning*, serves as the theoretical basis of the book, delving into concepts like motivation, cognition, multimodality, and linguistics related to informal language learning. Chapter 1 discusses the issue of motivation that the learners experience in the informal language learning setting. Anchored in Benson's Informal language learning framework (2011), Chik reveals that using *Duolingo* (https://en.duolingo.com) as an informal online language learning improves learners' motivation and language identity. In Chapter 2, Christianson and Deshaies, contrasting the cognitive aspect of language learning between adults and children, argued that although adults have more metalinguistics awareness and practice more extensive learning strategies, children prove to be more effective learners. They have a less complex linguistics production allowing them to produce languages without being afraid of making mistakes. Chapter 3 discusses the critical role of multimodality in the success of informal language learning. Based on C. S. Peirce's pragmatic linguistics theory, Dressman argues that multiple sources of semiotic input in informal learning settings ease learners to engage and interpret the message in written or spoken language. For example, the multimodal materials' visual images and sound provide the learners with multiple sign systems assisting them in understanding the language compared to a single sign system in general formal settings. Chapter 4 discusses the key role of contexts in language learning within first and second language acquisition and heritage language learning. Montrul concludes that language learning occurs in various learning contexts, and the context determines what and how the language is learned. Chapter 5 promotes the importance of informal learning activities for younger and beginning language learners. Due to its 'low-stakes nature,' Matsuda and Nouri argue that informal writing facilitates a meaningful and authentic language learning environment by directing writing activities as an engagement or participation rather than a product or performance.

Part two, *Learning in Digital Contexts*, presents empirical research on digital technology in informal language learning settings. In Chapter 6, Sadler discusses the benefits of *virtual worlds (VWs)* in facilitating natural interaction and lowering learners' anxiety. Drawing on Oldenburg's Third-Space theory (1999), Sadler proves that VWs such as *Second Life* (https://secondlife.com) facilitate effective language learning like access to resources and real-

life language use. In Chapter 7, Knight, Marean and Sykes review another virtual setting, namely digital gaming and *MMORPGs* (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game). They state that these learning spaces allow people worldwide to collaborate and have intense interactions needed in language learning and improve the learners' global competencies such as appreciating different views and understanding local and global issues. In Chapter 8, Arvanitis reviews some mobile language apps and examines the two most cited apps, namely *Duolingo* (https://en.duolingo.com) and *Babbel* (https://uk.babbel.com). The writer highlights three key benefits of these apps: learner autonomy, self-assessment and feedback, and learner motivation. In Chapter 9, Sauro explores *Fan Fiction* as a different genre of digital learning. The writer argues that during the writing and publishing of online reviews on their favorite books and movies, the learners find themselves more motivated in writing and reading and shape their identity as critical readers and writers. In Chapter 10, Codreanu and Combe discuss the potential benefits of *vlog*s (video blogs) in informal language learning. The writers highlight some potential benefits of language learning within vlogging activities such as extensive language production, development in digital literacy, multimodal interactions, and intercultural exchanges. Chapter 11, the final chapter in Part One, Kukulska-Hulme and Lee conduct a review study introducing a wide range of informal and formal learning activities through current technologies such as mobile phones and tablets. They highlight that collaborative learning and social interactions in the organized online setting create a supportive learning environment for language learners.

Part Three, *Learning Through Media and Live Contact*, discusses other media and resources available for language learners in informal settings. Vanderplank, in Chapter 12, critically compared the use of captioned and subtitled videos and movies. The writer concludes that although both media produce effective learning, captioned videos proved more effective. Likewise, in Chapter 13, Ludke reported that besides improving listening and speaking skills, listening to English songs develops vocabulary, grammar knowledge, and intercultural communication skills. In Chapter 14, Perry and Moses focus on immigrants' language learning strategies. They found that immigrants in the 21st century have interacted with various communities outside their family circles, such as with other immigrants in the country and worldwide, enabling them to have multiple opportunities to develop their second language skills. Similarly, Janta and Keller, in Chapter 15, studying immigrants in the service work

sector, provide an in-depth review on the empirical research on how immigrant service workers within low and high interaction styles use the second language in their workplace. The writers examine these interaction styles by analyzing the immigrants' motivation, coping strategy, and socialization. Chapter 16 focuses on the linguistic landscape as informal language affordances. Roos and Nicholas prove that little scaffold could improve learners' language awareness and help them to transform the linguistic landscapes found in the signs, advertisements, and TV programs to be beneficial language sources and language inventories. In Chapter 17, Iglesias discusses the language and cultural immersion within a short program of 'language tourism.' The writer acknowledges that the immersion dimension in language tourism subconsciously improved the learners' new language skills and self-realization.

Part four, *International Case Studies of Informal Language Learners*, focuses on socio-cultural and political aspects of informal language learning. In Chapter 18, Lai and Lyu reveal that both the government and the language learners in the multicultural context of Hong Kong have recognized the importance of informal language learning practices. The government has invested funding in various self-access language learning Centers while the learners have actively engaged in various informal language learning practices to maximize their learning outcomes. In Chapter 19, Lee highlights that cultural factors and national examination policies have hindered Korean language learners from engaging in informal practices. However, the study also showed a growing population of students actively engaged with informal language learning activities with technology such as the online game. Lee reported that their engagement with informal language learning correlated positively to their language skills, particularly speaking and writing. Moving to the African context, in Chapter 20, Dressman studying first-year students of three Moroccon universities reveals that their active engagement in informal language activities positively correlates to their speaking proficiency. The writer also highlights that access to digital technologies shapes the nature of students' informal language learning. Meanwhile, Sundqvist, in Chapter 21, introducing his concepts of informal language learning, namely "driving force" and "physical location," discussed how the Swedish people learn various languages informally. He also highlights that technology and globalization have turned informal language learning into an emerging issue, particularly how the learners adapt to this learning ecology. In Chapter 22, Kusyk acknowledges that while French's people were not generally

interested in learning additional languages in the past, the intense engagement with technologies and digital media have changed their perception and attitude to learning additional languages.

Part Five, *Informal Learning and Formal Contexts*, focuses on the interrelation between informal and formal language classrooms. In Chapter 23, McCarthey, Nuñez, and Lee look at how translanguaging allows language learners with a limited vocabulary to participate in casual settings and classroom instructional activities. The authors demonstrate how using two language systems in translanguaging aids learners in communicating meaning. Zourou, in Chapter 24, critically reviews the social network in digital-based learning tools such as mobile and game-based learning. Zourou acknowledges the degree of learners' agency and readiness to adapt to the learning flexibility through technology beyond their formal settings, such as creating a personal learning community. Likewise, Zheng and Lin in Chapter 25, suggest that informal digital writing activities such as blogging, tweeting, and messaging strengthen learners' writing development skills, identity, and motivation. The writers offer some practical activities to incorporate informal writing activities into formal language learning, such as wiki and social media. In Chapter 26, Ewert acknowledges the benefits of informal reading activities through novels and magazines. The writer argues that extensive informal reading activities improve learners' reading comprehensions skills and vocabulary development. Ewert also cites potential challenges such as learners' ability to access informal texts that fit their cultural and linguistic competence. Hubbard, in Chapter 27, also discusses the potential benefit of incorporating informal learning practices into the formal classroom by promoting a metacognitive approach. It is useful to assist the learners in bringing informal language learning practices to their classroom activities. Finally, Chapter 28 examines the characteristics of informal language learning. Murphy Odo highlights several characteristics of informal language learning that fit the learning principles in formal language classrooms, such as autonomy, motivation, and language identity.

Part Six, *The Present and Future of Informal Language Learning*, provides a final remark on the issue of informal language learning in the present and future time. In Chapter 29, Slatyer and Forget review the development of AI and its impact on digital translation and discuss the use of three translations apps. They conclude that the apps provide accessible and reliable translation with good accuracy but are less reliable for catching the natural language use within the context. Godwin-Jones, in Chapter 30, highlighted current and future practices of informal language learning, particularly with the fast advance of technology. Jones

encapsulates varieties of technology such as social media, games, online language learning apps, massive open online courses, and language learning social network sites to contribute to the growing population of fully autonomous language learners. Godwin-Jones recommends fully integrating informal and formal language learning material to help the learners learn linguistic and cultural aspects of language learning. Finally, in Chapter 31, Sockett and Toffoli provide a holistic view of informal language learning and offer complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) and self-determination theory (SDT) and promising frameworks to examine the nature of informal language learning. They also reflect the informal language learning within three areas (education, SLA, and TESOL) and specifically discuss some areas in informal language learning that need to be researched further.

As researchers and educators, we found this volume a compelling read that helps readers understand informal language learning as an emerging field in applied linguistics. The volume includes empirical, theoretical, and practical accounts of informal language learning that could assist practitioners, teachers, and researchers in understanding holistic learning in informal language learning dimensions and provide them with grounded guidance on bringing the value of informality into language learning. The book is, of course, not without any limitations. First, the empirical evidence provided in the volume is mainly from a well-facilitated learning context with access to advanced technology. The volume excludes informal language learning in less facilitated learning environments such as in developing countries and rural areas where some basic learning facilities such as books and technologies are limited. Second, social aspects of informal language learning, such as how social values, regulations, and norms, particularly where English is an additional language, determine language learners' access to informal language learning sources. These two issues are relevant to enrich our understanding of this field. Despite these flaws, the book volume has succeeded in providing academics and teachers worldwide with solid practical and theoretical foundations of informal language learning. This book is mandatory reading for every language learner, teacher, and scholar interested in the field.

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