

ELEMENTS OF INFORMAL LEARNING IN TEACHING PROCESS IN GENERAL ENGLISH CLASSES AT KAZAN FEDERAL UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The paper is devoted to applying informal learning techniques in teaching General English to students of Kazan Federal University, Russian Federation. Informal learning is frequently regarded as an alternative to formal, didactic instruction. The relevance of the paper is not questioned, as positive emotions that are peculiar to informal learning, facilitate the process of language learning and studying to students of any age. Knowledge acquired through positive experience is kept in memory for longer time compared to information and skills obtained in standard formal system of education. The informal learning deals with learning and innovation as goals, and they all include guidance to newcomers through social interaction and/or the structure of activities. The paper considers informal learning theory, which includes its definition and characteristics and overviews various informal learning strategies, used in General English lessons. In addition to it, stages of managing the educational process by the means of these technologies are considered. Usage of above-mentioned methods in English lessons at Kazan Federal University is presented in the given work.

Keywords: education, informal learning, university, student, ESL.

1 INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a second language in the university context is rather challenging. It can be explained by several reasons. Firstly, first year students are not children and they have some experience in learning English, which is not always successful. Secondly, learning a foreign language in non-English speaking country, which Russian Federation is, depends on such factors as students' aptitude, cognition, motivation, attitude, regular practice, emotional involvement, learning strategies, individual differences, anxiety to foreign language and others. Finally, within the framework of higher education, the major outcome of foreign language acquisition includes not only ability to speak in everyday situations as greeting, asking directions, ordering food, but also competence of interacting in the field of professional communication, for instance, making a report or presentation, participating in the negotiations.

So, while teaching English, teachers face the following challenges:

- 1 Learners' level should be taken into consideration. The students of Kazan Federal University are divided into four levels: Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, Upper-Intermediate and Advanced. Years of experience show that most students are of Intermediate level. However level of English varies every year and depends on the students' major.
- 2 The learning process should create all the necessary conditions for students to acquire new knowledge as well as to revise the old one, therefore teaching English at University incorporates various approaches and methods to achieve the final goal.
- 3 As it was mentioned above, developing skills in the sphere of professional communication is crucial. This fact implies that elements of English for Specific Purposes should be included.

Given these challenges, different teaching strategies should be applied, and informal learning enables creating unique friendly educational environment, which is comfortable for both students and teachers. Traditionally teaching English at University is regarded as formal learning with schedule, deadlines, tests, projects, credits, points, etc. However, including at least some elements of informal learning increases motivation, reduces stress (which unfortunately is peculiar to formal leaning), enhances students' knowledge, positively affects communication skills, enriches social interaction and helps to build and strengthen trust in students' community and with a teacher. The latter will provide good basis for further studying at University within traditional framework. Positive emotions, which are peculiar to informal learning, facilitate the process of language learning and studying to students of any age. Informal learning incorporates unique range of resources, strategies and relationships which contribute to non-linear language development for each learner. Knowledge acquired through positive experience is kept in memory for longer time compared to information and skills obtained in standard formal system of education.

2 METHODOLOGY

The paper discusses different informal learning approaches to teaching Non-native students within the framework of higher education. Further, the advantages of this teaching method are outlined. There applied such methods of investigation as observation, testing, investigating and summarising the experience of other teachers. Consequently, the implementation of elements of informal learning in teaching English at Kazan Federal University is described.

3 RESULTS

It is a generally accepted fact that teaching English for General purposes nowadays is becoming more and more interactive, thus allowing innovative methods replace the traditional ones. Research into the informal learning of English has already shown it to be a widespread phenomenon involving a range of comprehension and production activities such as viewing (with further discussion) original version television series, listening to music on demand, social networking with other English users, etc. Interactivity being one of the cornerstones of informal learning is natural for any English language course, insofar as its main purpose is to develop the learners' ability to communicate in English, that is to interact with each other, in real life situations. Besides, implementing elements of informal English language learning meets the contemporary requirements imposed on linguistic education, as it allows for a learner-centered and practice-oriented paradigm.

3.1 Informal learning theory overview

Jay Cross argues that 'learning is that which enables you to participate successfully in life, at work, and in the groups that matter to you. Informal learning is the unofficial, unscheduled, impromptu way people learn to do their jobs'. [1] This commonly accepted definition demonstrates significance of society in general, and community in particular, for informal learning. Thus, it dates us back to Confucius and Aristotle who were early proponents of learning by doing. Then, Socrates contributed to learning through questioning, inquiry, and critical thinking.

The literature reviewed indicated that despite the growing popularity, informal learning is not clearly defined. To begin with, the term learning is often misunderstood and replaced by the term education. Smith notes that 'within much that is written and said about the area, learning and education are confused; and there is an over-concern with institutional setting or sponsorship as against process and content'. [2]

Macià and García add in their work that informal learning is "learning from experience that takes place outside formally structured, institutionally sponsored, class-room based activities". [3] Thus, we can see that for many scholars institutional setting seems to be the crucial factor for making the distinction between formal and informal learning. They point out that informal learning is related to a person's life experience and takes place outside formal educational institution. [4] However, in our view it is not quite correct to restrain informal learning with territorial boundaries. Since educational institution performs critical function in terms of not only 'education' but also it largely contributes to person's communication and social skills, outlook on life and set of life values and principles, informal learning is for sure to be found in educational process.

In other words informal learning is a good way to organize students' outclass activity and show them that learning takes place not only at educational institute but far beyond, being present in everyday life and activities. When something is done by a person's own initiative and desire, learning becomes more effective and productive, since it is inspired by a person's motivation and takes place not in the class. However these facts do not mean informal learning cannot be stimulated or partially organized by a teacher, neither it means that elements of informal learning cannot be implemented in educational process by a teacher. Many researchers note in their works that informal learning is a lifelong process whereby 'individuals acquire information from daily experience and the educational influences and resources in his or her environment'. [5]

Informal learning goes beyond the space of the educational institution with regard to its educational practices and steps outside the temporal limits of educational system since it gives the possibility to negotiate schedules with the necessary degree of flexibility. As a result basic education is perceived as only a prelude, aimed to provide people with means of communication and to develop their ability to obtain information independently. In 1929 educationalist Yeaxlee wrote in his work "Life, to be vivid, strong and creative, demands constant reflection upon experience, so that action may be guided by wisdom...". [6] Therefore informal learning is closely connected with the notion of the learning society

since it is expected to maximize the existing educational potential in local communities. In this sense, the society can also be seen as educational. [7]

Advantages of informal learning are apparent, however drawbacks are also mentioned in most literature, and include the fact that there is plenty of misinformation available on various social media platforms. Several researchers reported disadvantages of using social networking sites for learning purpose. This is mainly related to users' concerns of their privacy of personal information. Therefore, one of the main concerns for users who register on these sites is privacy. [8] Another disadvantage is that informal learning does not follow a proper schedule or plan, so it lacks discipline and attitude amongst the learners. As for implementing informal learning at educational institution, its key difficulty is related to keeping the efficiency of organization of formal learning and combining it with the motivation and positive outcome of the informal learning. While dealing with informal learning it is crucial to develop flexible mechanisms that support this kind of learning (and not to destroy it turning it into artificial one with many regulations and rules) while avoiding the drawbacks that coincide with informality.

3.2 Informal English learning at Kazan Federal University

Educational process at Kazan Federal University today tends to be student-centered and humanistic in its essence. The latter is primarily true of teaching ESL. English language, as a subject, has a great capacity for cultural and personal development of the students. Jeyasala V.R. stresses that successful interaction on English lessons can be achieved under certain conditions. Firstly, teachers must create the desirable atmosphere and good relations among students. Secondly, individuals must appreciate the uniqueness of every person and be tolerant and respectful to each other. Above all, classrooms should not be teacher-directed and dominated. [9] The given prerequisites perfectly fit informal language learning, using elements of which will prepare good basis for traditional learning.

At Kazan Federal University English is a prescribed general education course for freshmen. Students have this course from one to two years depending on their major. English language learning can be subdivided into two kinds of learning processes, namely the formal and informal learning stages. Many language teachers might be discouraged to use informal learning methods in their practice due to existing opposition between formal and informal kinds of learning. However most teachers already use at least some elements of informal learning probably without even realizing it. Further we describe how we apply components of informal learning in our practice.

The first thing that comes to most teachers' and scholars' minds while talking about informal learning is using Internet possibilities, namely social networking sites. They offer an alternative informal, mobile environment with flexible teaching and learning that have no time constraints. Integrating social networking sites in learning process may enhance students' interest, motivation and encourage collaboration between English language learners. Nowadays we are so used to communicating via Internet that students being united on social networking sites on the basis of their studying/ academic groups, common interests or activities enthusiastically use this chance to discuss something they are interested in and exchange opinions. Our teachers use a great variety of activities based on social networking sites including creating general groups for free communication, setting specific tasks (like commenting the news, discussing holiday plans or out-of-class activity, choosing the best photo captions, making stories in English, etc.). We have to admit that it is not pure informal learning since it contains tasks and organized by the teacher, but at the same time it is not limited by the former setting of the classroom and goes far beyond. It might surprise but students appreciate opportunity to speak with their teacher on a wide scope of themes not just in the classroom and express their own thoughts and views. Thus, learning continues in everyday life experience. It is our present-day reality that we are always online, so instead of complaining that students spend too much time in Internet, we can make use of it and turn time spent online to something productive. This is how informal learning works, sometimes students might not even realize that they are already taking part in the learning process.

Another way to realize online informal language learning is making use of online messengers. It can be a good language practice to communicate with English teacher in English, including texting and sending instant messages. At first students might be unwilling or embarrassed to practice English outside the class, it particularly refers to students with not very good level of their English. However gradually students get used to communicating with their English teacher in English and start enjoying the process and even Elementary students despite finding it unusual at first, later emphasize use of such practice. Additional advantage of using online informal language learning is that it helps students to overcome psychological barriers since for some students it is easier to write/ text online than to speak face-to-face in real life. It is worth mentioning that such out-of-class communicating in the English language helps to create language environment without going to an English-speaking country.

It should also be noted that most types of leisure activities can be used by a teacher within the framework of informal learning. Choice of activities should be done basing on students' characters and preferences. Our teachers at Kazan Federal University successfully strengthen interdisciplinary ties while practising English with their students not only inside the class. Our students like to go to museums of KFU (there are 12 museums at Kazan Federal University) and in case of proper teacher's direction and good relations a visit to museum (as well as a walk to museum and back to University) can be turned to an interesting experience full of not only new impressions but also a great deal of English language practice. When students are not in the class they feel more relaxed, it is easier for them to speak in non-classroom conditions. That is why it is very effective to organize some activities outside the class or go to some events together as a group.

All students like to watch films in the original, however the experience shows that it is more productive to watch films not in the class but rather go to the cinema (or cinema club) together and later have some kind of discussion. Students' attitude towards discussion will be different compared to the one held in the class since in such a situation language users see themselves as involved in leisure activities rather than completing the task given by a teacher.

Elements of informal learning can be effectively used to manage stages of education process as well. In the end of the English course we like to give our students final task/ project which includes making their own short film. Students make the final project for several weeks. However, the most important in this task is not the result but the process, which includes writing the script, brushing articulation, learning the words, working over intonation and voice before appearing in front of the camera. As students acknowledge later they greatly enjoy the process and spend a lot of time practising their English and having fun. Students are so interested and involved in the process that they do not realize that they practise their English outside the class and in their free time.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The given article presents analyses of informal learning in teaching English for general purposes as well as distinguishes between informal and formal types of learning. It overviews how teaching the English language can benefit from using elements of informal learning in teaching process at University.

All studies related to informal learning highlight its main advantages such as boosting learners' motivation and engagement, improving language skills, fluency, comprehension skills, using English in situations close to real life. In addition, positive emotions, which are peculiar to informal learning, facilitate the process of language and as a result informal learning enriches social interaction and helps to build and strengthen trust in students' community and with a teacher. Students note that informal language learning impact positively on problem solving skills, team work skills, logical and creative thinking, help them to overcome some psychological barriers and express themselves.

The work also shows experience of the English teachers at Kazan Federal University on implementing elements of informal learning in teaching general English.

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