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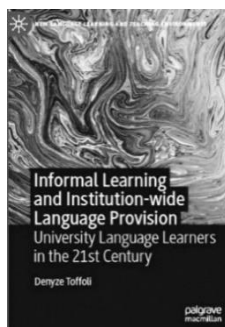
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Note de lecture de
***Informal Learning and Institution-Wide Language Provision:
University Language Learners in the 21st Century***

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PhD in Language Sciences & English Literature and Anglo-Saxon Studies



TOFFOLI, Denyze. 2020. ***Informal Learning and Institution-Wide Language Provision: University Language Learners in the 21st Century***. Palgrave Macmillan, 230 pages.

This book is dedicated to analysing second language learning (L2). Denyze Toffoli focuses on university students, noting that more than 50% of the population in developed countries attend higher education. Moreover, these students make up a large percentage of the European youth, who will become our professionals, engineers, managers, and technicians.

Language learning at the university level is considered a complex system. Today's language learner adopts many roles. A student is no longer only a language learner but also an internet user, a gamer, a traveller, an employee, thereby creating a complex language-learning context. Through an in-depth explanation of both complex and dynamic systems, a clear definition of a "contemporary language learner" is given and the many parameters that make up this learner are described.

The book sheds light on the importance of the "outside-classroom" environment where students engage in activities that influence their informal process of language learning. Moreover, language learners must adapt constantly to their ever-changing environment.

Informal Learning and Institution-wide Language Provision is divided into three main parts: theoretical views on the contemporary L2 learner; contexts of contemporary language development and, finally, university language learners in the 21st century. Part 1 consists of three chapters, part 2 contains four chapters and part 3 is limited to one chapter only.

In the first chapter, important concepts about Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) are defined. The first concept is *initial conditions*: current difficulties of addressing groups of students with homogeneous language exposure and backgrounds. The second, *non-linear* complex dynamic systems for which what happens both in the classroom context (education paradigm) and the outside-the-

classroom context (development paradigm) have to be considered. Third, *dynamism* or the system's movement, which can be seen as the opposite of stability, corresponds to a lack of movement within a system. Fourth, the concept of *emergence* is described as “an open process of permanent self-renewal, without a predetermined or even desired end state” (10).

To explain the relevance of the Complex Dynamic Systems Theory in Language Learning, the author demonstrates how this theory can help to increase understanding of the modern language learner. “In considering language learning as a dynamic system, we can focus on both the learners and on the learning environments in which their language skills develop and progress” (12).

The closest theory to the complex and dynamic systems is the *self-determination theory*. The three main components of this theory are autonomy, competence and relatedness. This theory is in line with complex dynamic theory as it considers the biological phenomena that underlie psychological processes and evolutionary perspectives. It postulates three classes of motivation: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and amotivation. What distinguishes them is the degree to which they are determined by the individual. The self-determination theory makes it possible to understand the intensity of motivation, its degree of interiority and its relationship to the surrounding environment. It builds on three basic psychological needs: the need for autonomy, the need for relatedness and the need for a sense of competence.

In this book, autonomy is presented as an essential feature of the contemporary language learner that is closely linked to the related notion of agency, *i.e.* the perception of oneself as someone who acts in the world and not as the relatively passive object of the actions of others. It is argued that autonomy is present in the contemporary language learning process in a language classroom even if it does not lead to the specific type of learning the teacher intended.

It is believed that a pragmatic perspective helps move from competence being viewed as a vague concept, to a criterion-based profile of skills. Self-efficacy, learning and the ability to implement the elements necessary for learning, and digital literacy are three other areas of competence that play important roles in the contemporary language learning process. In this part, the different aspects that may help language learners feel competent are presented.

Relatedness is defined as “allowing the individual to grow and to find a sense of well-being and being socially connected and a feeling of belonging” (45). It is considered as an essential component of learning, because language involves communication and in the process of learning an L2, one is often communicating with others.

The focus of the last chapter is on the examination of two students who have reported their own practices in English. Comments on each portrait are provided according to the previously presented theories. A thorough comparison between them is provided involving their amplitude, level in English and what they think about and analyses, informal English learning, and their learning strategies.

The second part of the book begins by focusing on language teaching/learning systems, describing informal language development practices outside institutional

arrangements, then integrating them into a global scheme that models the complexity of these systemic interactions. This chapter aims at answering questions, such as “to what extent do the educational choices made by institutions of higher learning affect the learning and language outcomes of students?” “Can we find evidence for establishing or integrating certain instructional approaches rather than others?” “How do students react to different types of learning?” “What does the science tell us?” and “Can we prescribe ‘best practices’ and preferred pedagogies?” (75)

Key factors that shape current higher education policies are discussed concluding that the same factors influence English language policies, be they in any developed country or in the most affluent Anglophone countries.

This part continues the contextual exploration of language training in higher education through examining the notion of self-access by taking a closer look at some of the pedagogical principles associated with it, and by considering the ways it can be reinvented to correspond to the needs of contemporary learners in higher education. As the author considers these learners as complex and dynamic systems in themselves, the environments in which they operate are also complex and dynamic systems, whether formalised or not. Additionally, it is explained how and why the curricula of English departments in France are different, and provides examples of the differences in curricula for students in different domains.

The focus being on the importance of learning outside the classroom and the practices it involves, it is mentioned that the informal learning that students engage in may or may not be linked to their formal education. Notions of location, formality and modes of practice are defined and distinctions between formal, non-formal and informal learning are also provided.

Moreover, Informal Digital Learning of English is discussed; how it is defined, practised and acquired is explained. Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) is discussed, which is one of the main vehicles for the appropriation and development of English today in France. It is explained that OILE is in a constant state of change, thus what educators can expect from it varies accordingly.

Additionally, a comprehensive comparison describes how A2- and B1-level students engage in outside-the-classroom activities that can contribute to their informal learning of the target language. Some examples of these activities are listening to music, watching television series, and playing videogames. It is explained that when L2 learners engage in outside-the-classroom activities, they express their identity while the language content in those activities plays a significant role in this identity.

The importance of OILE for teachers in the contemporary language learning process is emphasised. In language learning setups, developing autonomy and self-directed learning is of great importance. Thus, teachers’ knowledge of extracurricular activities, their attitude towards them and the support they could provide to ensure that students get the most out of them may well be decisive: “OILE, as we have defined it, illustrates the complex and dynamic nature of language learning, putting the teachers in a position where they must manage students with very diverse experiences and knowledge of English, with skills that develop at

different rates and in different directions, often in relation to content that teachers barely know.” (167)

In the last part, the focus is on combining reflections on learning in an informal context with learning in an institutional context and identifying the junctions between the two. The author aims at portraying contemporary language learners in higher education while trying to avoid any over-personalisation of their profiles: “Visualising this profile, while respecting its multiplicity, multidimensionality and the set of interactions involved, would ideally render explicit the progressive emergence of language competence” (186). In this part, links are made between the preceding chapters by portraying the L2 learners’ profiles and their progression through the contexts, which bring them into contact with the L2 as a complex and dynamic system. Additionally, the author defines the contemporary L2 learner as an autonomous learner, especially when it comes to English activities outside the class. This is how learners create a specific language system: their own interlanguage. In conclusion, bridges can be found between academic or professional obligations and the extensive – even massive –personal practices of an L2 in informal contexts.

This book provides a detailed description of the characteristics and requirements of autonomous contemporary language learners, and demonstrates how the implications of those requirements can influence teachers and language institutions’ policy-makers. This knowledge serves L2 teachers and students, regardless of their mother tongue or the target L2.