Formal and Informal Foreign Language Learning at University:

Blurring the boundaries

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the integration of informal language learning into university language modules in a foreign language environment. It begins with an exploration of the evolving nature of formal and informal language learning. This is followed by analysis of a pedagogic innovation intended to integrate foreign language activities in an informal university space shared by domestic and international students into formal German and Spanish language modules in an Anglophone context. The initiative is evaluated within an action research framework using the following research instruments: student attendance data, reflective reports, end-of-module student surveys and a collaborative debrief with two International Language Tutors. The results indicate that the explicit integration of informal language learning into formal language modules increases student engagement with informal language learning, provides opportunities for oral practice in particular, and supports the development of language learner autonomy. Thus, while care must be taken to ensure that the informal nature of the informal language learning experience is retained using appropriate low stakes assessment and a fluid, flexible, student-led pedagogical approach, the findings indicate that the explicit integration of informal language learning activities into formal language learning has the potential to expand the Personal Learning Environment of the foreign language learner to their benefit.

Introduction

Research on foreign language teaching and learning has tended to focus on formal classroom settings. With some notable exceptions (Reinders, Lai and Sundqvist 2022), less work has been done on informal language learning taking place beyond the classroom. As a result, our understanding of informal language learning remains limited. This is particularly true in relation to the interaction between formal and informal foreign language learning in predominantly formal language learning contexts (Reinders and Benson 2017).

However, there are extensive and growing opportunities for informal language learning (Dressman 2020). For example, increased migration and the internationalisation of higher education mean that the university campus is becoming an increasingly multilingual environment (Bruen and Kelly 2016; Bruen and Kelly 2020). As a result, it offers extensive potential opportunities for informal foreign language learning. However, these opportunities for informal foreign language learning are frequently neglected, particularly in Anglophone contexts (Dressman 2020). The reasons for this neglect remain unclear.

In order to address these gaps in our understanding, the overarching aims of this study are twofold: Firstly, to gain a greater understanding of the role of informal language learning in a university setting. Secondly, to determine how best to design and deliver formal language modules in order to encourage and integrate participation in some of the informal learning opportunities present in the undergraduate language learners' environment.

Formal, Informal, Non-Formal and Intra-Formal Learning: A review of the literature

The most basic distinction between formal and informal language learning differentiates between language learning in the language classroom and language learning beyond the language classroom (LBC) (Reinders, Lai and Sundqvist 2022). However, given the complexity and fluidity of language learning environments, and increasing opportunities for language learning arising from technological advances and increased mobility (Bruen and Kelly 2020), this distinction can only ever act as a starting point for discussion on these categories of learning.

McGivney (1999 as quoted in Cristol and Muller 2013, 22) identifies a range of characteristics, which distinguish between formal and informal learning. These include a connection to an educational context, the intention on the part of the learner when engaging in an activity, the pedagogical approach and the locus of control of the learning process, i.e. the extent to which teachers or learners direct the learning process. McGivney (2001) further argues that informal language learning is characterised by the absence of a prescribed learning framework, a chronological content outline, the transfer of knowledge from a teacher, assessed learning outcomes and associated credits or qualifications. Instead, the term informal language learning represents a 'broad, loose concept that includes a huge diversity of activities, motivations, contexts, styles, learning settings and arrangements' (McGivney, 2001, 102).

Benson (2011) and Richards (2015) suggest two further frameworks to distinguish between formal and informal language learning. Benson's (2011) model measures formality along four dimensions. These include degree of formality and structure, locus of control, location inside or outside of a classroom and the nature of the pedagogy, including the extent to which instruction and explicit explanation are provided. Reinders and Benson (2017) observe that

each of these dimensions is complex and a matter of degree as opposed to an either/or distinction. Richards (2015) also discusses additional dimensions. These include the aims of the learner, ranging from intentional (formal) to incidental (informal) learning, and the type of interaction which can be one-way (formal) or two-way (informal).

The existence of such an array of dimensions to distinguish between formal and informal language learning supports the idea that formal and informal language learning are not discrete, bounded categories. Instead, they exist on a continuum from formal to informal language learning (Sockett and Toffoli 2020). As Livingstone (2006, 203) observes, 'forms of learning range from dominant teacher control through other forms that involve teachers/trainers/mentors to dominant learner control'. Hubbard (2020) notes that a structured, rigid form of language teaching featuring transmission, drills and a set curriculum sits at one (formal) end of the continuum. An extreme form of informal language learning which is extraneous to all educational contexts sits at the other.

The term, 'non-formal' language learning, has been used to refer to language learning using professionally produced language learning materials designed for self-access at a time and in a place of the learners choosing. These include language-learning platforms which often take the form of applications for smartphones. Researchers in the field of language learning (Chik 2020; Dressman 2020, 2) are increasingly including the use of such platforms in the category of informal or 'hybrid' language learning.

Alm (2019) uses the term 'intra-formal' to refer to the interdependent nature of informal and formal language learning. This notion of the interdependence of the different types of learning resonates with Sockett's (2023) argument that a 'Personal Learning Environment'

(PLE) is a useful metaphor to aid a more holistic understanding of the experience of the language learner operating within a learning ecosystem made up of opportunities for formal, non-formal and informal language learning. Such arguments favouring the interdependent nature of informal and formal language learning further echo Reinders and Benson's (2017) view that formal and informal language learning represent elements within the broader 'social ecologies' of language learning (see also Palfreyman 2014).

Yung (2015) observes the complementary nature of informal language learning at secondary school level, for example in supporting the development of oral skills, particularly spontaneous production. Both Chik (2008) and Decius, Dannowsky and Schaper (2022) emphasise the significance of both formal and informal learning at the tertiary level in particular. Indeed, Chik (2008) notes the central importance of more formal learning during the primary school years, the value of both formal and informal instruction during the secondary school years and a focus on informal learning at the tertiary level. Decius, Dannowsky and Schaper (2022) also argue that university students learn both in formal courses as well as in a more autonomous and self-directed manner beyond the classroom. Traditionally, an important location for such self-directed learning has been self-access language centres. However, in light of the widespread availability of online language learning resources, these are becoming less significant as sources of materials. Instead, some universities are developing social spaces shared by domestic and international students in which informal language and intercultural learning can occur. As Lai and Lyu (2020, 275) observe in relation to these spaces, their 'emotional and social support functions in the forms of learning-advising sessions and of activity and gathering venues, are getting more important'.

Hubbard (2020) and Murphy Odo (2020) acknowledge a connection between engagement with informal learning and the development of learner autonomy, or an ability to take charge of one's own learning over time (Holec 1981; Teng 2018). Murphy Odo (2020), for example, argues that engagement by students in informal learning gives them a sense of control over their own language learning. In his view, this is an important stage in the development of learner autonomy as it provides an indication to the language learner that lifelong language learning is possible outside of a classroom and independently of a set curriculum. Little (2020, 64) further argues that 'language learner autonomy' denotes a teaching/learning dynamic in which learners plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their own learning [...] as far as possible in the target language', while Benson (2011) agrees that autonomy may be best understood in informal contexts where there is greater scope to take responsibility for learning.

The focus of research on foreign language teaching and learning to date has been almost exclusively on more formal classroom settings (Reinders, Lai and Sundqvist 2022). Relatively little research has been conducted on informal language learning that may be going on beyond the language classroom in parallel to formal language learning or that could potentially be encouraged in parallel with formal language learning (Reinders and Benson 2017). As Reinders and Benson (2017, 563-564) point out:

> The classroom is [...] likely to be one of a number of settings that make up the affordances for, and constraints on, language learning within a broader environment. At present, however, we do not have an adequate understanding of how these settings blend in particular contexts of learning and teaching. There is also much to be done to

build on innovative work that examines how students make use of the varied opportunities for LBC in their environments and connect these to classroom learning.

This is particularly the case in relation to learners of languages other than English in foreign language learning contexts. The aim of this research is to begin to address this gap in our knowledge by investigating how informal language learning by university undergraduate students can be encouraged in a formal foreign language learning environment. In particular, this study considers the following research question:

1. How can informal language learning in student-led informal language learning spaces shared by domestic and international university students be encouraged and integrated into university language modules?

To additional sub-questions whose salience is indicated by the review of the literature in the previous section are:

2. Does such engagement in informal language learning spaces encourage foreign language learning?

3. Does such engagement in informal language learning contribute to the development of language learner autonomy?

Action Research Study

Research Framework and Methodology

This research was carried out within an Action Research (AR) paradigm which involves the identification of an issue to be addressed, the gathering of background information through a review of the relevant literature, the design of a study/initiative and methods of data

collection for the purpose of the evaluation of the initiative, the analysis and interpretation of the data and the implementation of the findings (Efrat and David 2020). AR supports teachers in designing and evaluating the impact of a pedagogical initiative (Manfra 2019; Reiners and Benson 2017) to address a challenge. The challenge in question was a lack of engagement by domestic students with the space in the university known as the 'Languaculture Space' (LCS). The LCS is an informal language learning space, similar to those discussed in the previous section, which is shared by domestic students and international students. The physical space is deliberately differentiated from a classroom environment and designed to emulate a café or similar social space. While there are facilitators for each language on the university staff, the activities that take place within the LCS are student-led and the focus in the LCS is on informal interaction between the ever increasing numbers of domestic and international students on the university campus with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Research Design and Methods

Two modules, coordinated by the authors of this paper, were selected for this research, German/Spanish Business and Language II. These are pitched at level B1+ of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001) and have three formal timetabled contact hours over the 12 teaching weeks of the semester. Each is worth 10 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) credits. An eclectic range of teaching and learning methodologies and modalities is used to incorporate elements of learner choice and flexibility. However, given the explicit link to an educational context, a largely teacher-directed, structured, pedagogical approach, the likely intention on the part of the learner to pass the assessments in order to obtain credits and progress in their degree programme, these

modules are situated closer to the formal than the informal end of the formal-informal language learning continuum.

To address the research questions, a new informal component was introduced to these modules. The component included weekly unstructured sessions in the LCS facilitated by International Language Tutors[1]. The topics, which formed the basis of the LCS sessions, were agreed on a collaborative basis based on learner needs and interests on a week-to-week basis between the students and the tutor. The design of this component of the module was multilayered in the sense that, in order to retain their informal nature, the sessions were designed to be deliberately fluid and flexible. The students were encouraged to direct them via questions and expressions of interest and need. The tutors also encouraged the students to take part in as many as possible of the relevant student-led activities of their choosing taking place within the LCS (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Sample/Selected week's activities in the Languaculture Space

⭐ LCS Weekly Activities				
Time	**Monday**	**Tuesday**	**Wednesday**	**Thursday**	**Friday**
12-1	**Reserved for students from module GE296**	**Japanese Society Chat Room**	**German Conversation**	**Spanish Clinic French Clinic**	
1-2	**German Conversation**	**French Conversation**	**Spanish Conversation**	**Spanish** *Sobremesa**	
2-3		**Reserved for students from module SP296**		**Japanese Kanji**	

[1] The International Language Tutor role within the university is focussed on teaching and pedagogical innovation.

Time					
3-4		German Media Club	Japanese Conversation	Multilingual Coffee / International Picnic	Chinese New Year Celebrations - Calligraphy, Quiz & Chopstick Challenges
4-5		Quranic Reading	Chinese Conversation & Storytelling		
5-6		Russian Conversation		Arabic Conversation (Standard & Egyptian)	
6-7	(Various) multilingual movie nights	Japanese Society Chat Room	Spanish Board Game Evening		
Easy! To join an activity, come to the room at the time given on the timetable. It's free!					
Update every Friday!					

Taking time in the company of friends over food

Sockett (2023) observes that the question of how best to measure informal practices remains unresolved while Hubbard (2020, p. 416) recommends the use of reflective reports and debriefs. Bearing this in mind, in order to evaluate this initiative and address the three research questions, the following combination of instruments was used:

- Records of student attendance at the LCS sessions

- Reflective reports

- Student responses to a question about the LCS added to their end-of-module survey and

- A 40 minute collaborative oral debrief with the Tutors (Appendix A)[2].

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[2] Ethical permission for this project was granted by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee in the institution concerned. Plain Language Statements and Informed Consent Forms (ICFs) were distributed to the students at the end of one of their formal classes. All 12 of the students registered on the German module completed the ICF. Nineteen of the 25 students

Each of these data collection tools is now considered in turn:

Attendance Data

The International Language Tutors recorded student attendance at each of their weekly sessions within the LCS and provided the researchers with this data. The attendance data provided an initial indication of levels of engagement with the LCS.

Reflective Reports

Students were asked to write a reflective piece on their experiences in the LCS and, in particular, to respond to the following questions:

1. Please describe briefly what you did in the LCS this semester. Please refer to both your weekly sessions and your experience of any additional events that were part of the LCS programme this semester.

2. What do you think you learned from these?

3. What areas of German in particular do you think you still need to work on?

These questions were selected in order to gather evidence of engagement with the LCS (Research Question 1), to gather evidence of learning (Research Question 2) and to identify developing learner autonomy (Research Question 3). In addition, 10% of the grade for these modules was allocated to attendance and the reflective report in order to encourage participation. The allocation of 10% of the total grade to this portion of the module means that it was likely to represent low stakes assessment to the students and thus to be less strongly aligned with formal language learning (McGivney 2001). Of the 10%, five were allocated to attendance/participation and five to the reflective report (Figure 2):

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registered on the Spanish module returned an ICF. Only the data from these 19 students is included in this study.

Figure 2: Evaluation and assessment of LCS element of the modules

Activities	Grading Scheme
Attendance [5%]	8 or more sessions: 5%, 7 sessions: 4%, 6 sessions: 3%, 5 sessions: 2%, 4 sessions 1%, 3 or less sessions: 0%
Reflective Report [5%]	Equal marks were allocated to each of the three questions. They were marked on a scale from 0-4 as follows: '0' no evidence of engagement/learning/autonomy with no relevant information provided '1' 'little evidence' '2' 'some evidence' '3' 'substantial evidence of engagement/learning/autonomy with reasonably well developed responses and general examples given' '4' 'strong evidence of engagement/learning/autonomy with well developed responses and specific examples provided in support of points made.'

Student Survey Responses

Each year, students in the university concerned are invited to give feedback on their modules via an end-of-module survey on the course page within the institution's Virtual Learning Environment. For the purpose of this research, the following question was added to the end of module survey in order to gather non-directed, open-ended responses that could potentially address this study's research questions:

Please reflect briefly on your activities this semester in the Languaculture Space. What did you like or dislike about these? Should they be done differently in the future, do you think? If so, in what way(s)?

International Language Tutor Debrief

The debrief sits between a small focus group and an individual semi-structured interview (Hubbard 2020). The interviewer (this paper's first author) posed a general open-ended question to the two International Language Tutors for German and Spanish:

Could you tell me about your experience on module SP/GE296 this semester. What do you think worked well and is there anything you think should be changed for next year?

The conversation between them was then allowed to develop naturally for approximately 40 minutes. The conversation was recorded with the permission of the tutors and transcribed by one of the authors of this paper.

Data Analysis

An analysis of the data yielded by each of the research instruments was conducted as follows: Firstly, the quantitative data made up of the attendance data and the student scores on the reflective reports and their three constituent components was collated and analysed using averages and percentages.

Secondly, the qualitative material contained within the students' end-of-module survey was analysed using thematic content analysis (TCA). This is 'an emergent and interactive process of interpretation of a set of messages, with some thematic structure as the typical outcome' (Neuendorf 2018, no page numbers). TCA was appropriate in this instance as it facilitated the

identification of significant themes within the qualitative data (King and Brooks 2018). In order to carry out the analysis, the material was collated and read repeatedly by the authors. Emerging themes were identified and the number of mentions for each theme computed.

Thirdly, qualitative thematic analysis of the material in the students' reflective reports and the transcription of the interviews with the International Language Tutors was conducted. The purpose of this was to triangulate the data emerging from the analyses of the attendance data, student performance in the reflective reports and student responses to the end-of-module survey, and, thus, to strengthen the trustworthiness, validity and comprehensive nature of the findings.

Findings

This section presents the findings by research question.

Research Question 1: How can informal language learning in student-led informal language learning spaces shared by domestic and international university students be encouraged and integrated into university language modules?

Looking first at the issue of attendance and participation, analysis of the attendance data reveals that the LCS sessions were well attended. 59.4% of students achieved the full 5% for attendance and 94.5% of students attended at least six sessions (Table 1).

Table 1: Attendance

Number of sessions attended	Number of students (German) n=12	Percentage of students (German)	Number of students (Spanish) n=25	Percentage of students (Spanish)	Total number of students n=37	Percentage of students (total)

11*	_____	_____	1	4	1	**2.7**
10	1	8.3	4	16	5	**13.5**
9	1	8.3	5	20	6	**16.2**
8	4	33.3	6	24	10	**27**
7	3	25	5	20	8	**21.6**
6	2	16.7	3	12	5	**13.5**
5	-	-	-	-		
4	-	-	1	4	1	**2.7**
3	-	-	-	-	-	**-**
2	-	-	-	-	-	**-**
1	-	-	-	-	-	**-**
0	1	8.3	-	-	1	**2.7**

Among both the Spanish and the German cohorts, the largest percentage attended eight sessions, the minimum number required to obtain full marks for attendance. However, more than 30% of the students attended more sessions than required to obtain full marks for attendance. This percentage was higher for the Spanish (40%) than the German (16%) cohort bearing in mind that the students studying Spanish were offered 11 sessions and the students studying German 10 sessions, owing to the dates of holidays.

While attendance at similar, voluntary sessions in the LCS had not been precisely monitored during the previous semesters, anecdotal evidence suggests that this represented a significant increase in attendance. The tutor debrief supports the view that there has been an increase in interest in LCS events outside of the weekly sessions linked to the modules associated with this study. One commented:

And what we hope then is that they get curious about the other activities in the LCS. I'd be like yes Thursdays we have that and that, to connect it to the LCS [....]. Even other languages they're interested in. If they want to see how Japanese is done. That they get curious about languages. [German Tutor].

Increased attendance was noted in particular at the German Conversation sessions which took place directly after the weekly German sessions. The Tutor for Spanish observed that there also appeared to be increased interest in events including Spanish board game evenings organised in the LCS in conjunction with the Spanish society, Spanish movie nights and multicultural parties.

In addition, all 37 of the students registered on the two modules submitted a reflective report. The average total score for the reports was 11.2/12 (= 4.6/5%). The scores for the first question, intended to measure engagement, indicate that students provided either 'substantial evidence of engagement with reasonably well developed responses and general examples given' (score of 3/4) or 'strong evidence of engagement with well-developed responses and specific examples provided in support of points made' (score of 4/4) (Table 2) (see also information on the marking scheme for the reflective reports in the section, Research Design and Methodology).

Table 2: Average scores in the reflective reports: Engagement

Language/Average Score	Question 1
German	3.75/4.00
Spanish	3.76/4.00

The following representative extracts from the students' reflective reports further illustrate these findings:

> During the semester in the LCS, we went on an extensive German language learning journey, which involved many activities to improve our language proficiency. One of the most important parts of the programme is the focus on practical vocabulary that is useful in everyday conversations. To that end, we participated in many real scenarios that made it possible for us to practice and improve our German in different situations such as restaurants, markets and looking for accommodation in Germany. [German]

> We worked together in groups in all our sessions to talk about all these topics and help each other to improve our Spanish […] Most importantly during this semester, LCS gave me the opportunity to talk to my classmates and improve my spoken Spanish in a comfortable space. [Spanish]

The TCA of the end-of-module surveys provides further insights into the nature of the student experience in the LCS sessions. In particular, four interrelated themes emerged (Table 3).

Table 3: Themes emerging from online survey responses

Theme	Everyday topics/ 'real-life' language environment	Student-led; students spoke a lot	Relaxed, informal environment. Felt comfortable speaking.	Enjoyable
German module	5	3	4	4
Spanish module	6	7	4	4
Total mentions	11	10	8	8

The most common theme related to the nature of the material and the fact that it concerned everyday, 'real-life' communication 'and not just the business' [German]. All 11 students who mentioned this aspect spoke positively about it and stressed its value, for example 'Learned useful phrases etc. for daily life in Germany e.g. Ordering in a restaurant or going shopping' [German]. Seven of the participants specifically commented on the value of this aspect for their subsequent year which would be spend studying in a university in which their target language is spoken, for example:

> We compared Spanish and Irish stereotypes, talked about traditional meals and activities in Spain. I liked these because it gives you a better understanding of Spanish culture for the Erasmus year[3] [Spanish].

The fact that the activities were student led was highlighted by 10 students with eight praising the relaxed informal environment praised by eight of the participants. One commented 'I really liked the informal and relaxed atmosphere. This was aided by the nice couches and chairs in the room' also describing the sessions as 'a nice break'. Three of the eight explicitly observed that this environment made them feel more comfortable speaking and that there was no pressure to be 'of a certain standard' [Spanish]. One added '[....] although my oral German was not great I felt comfortable trying to speak' [German], and others 'Liked the relaxed environment didn't feel like a classroom' [German], 'I liked how we were given a space to improve speaking German and conversing in everyday German' [German]. Eight of the students also simply stressed how much they enjoyed their experience of the LCS. One stated 'I always looked forward to it.'[Spanish]. The tutors stressed that the experience was 'not a typical class environment which is nice' [German Tutor]. The tutors also further reinforced

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[3] Students spend one academic year studying in a Higher Education Institution in a country in which the target language is spoken. They receive what is known as an 'Erasmus+' grant from the European Union to contribute to their travel and subsistence costs. The grant is named after the Dutch philosopher Desiderius Erasmus. It also stands for 'European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students' (European Commission, no date).

the students' comments by reporting that some of the students were less hesitant in terms of speaking and asking questions and that they appeared to grow in confidence in using the language over the course of the semester. They stated:

> They are more confident to speak in German and they are not as paralysed any more when they are to speak [....] communication, that's the real benefit of it [German Tutor].

> It is communicative and is about using the language [....] we can integrate module content from a different more interactive perspective, [and] structures that are used in conversation [Spanish Tutor].

The tutors reported that the assessment type contributed to the informality of the experience. It did not require any 'teaching to a test' and encouraged reflection and participation.

> I think it is good not to give them an extra more formal assessment just more the reflection part of it. It takes away the pressure and leaves the freedom of doing what we think is best and not working towards an assessment. Really good. I like the way they reflect on their progress [German Tutor].

The students themselves did not comment on the assessment, potentially indicating that it did not play a particularly important role for them, outside perhaps of encouraging attendance (Bruen, Kelly and Loftus 2020).

Outside of these core themes three [German] students commented that they would like more time in the LCS. One [German] praised the opportunity to choose their own content and one [German] felt that the content should be more closely aligned with their lectures and seminars. Finally one student [Spanish] expressed their dislike of the 'no talking English' rule but also commented that they understood the reason for it.

The tutors also noted that the extent of active participation was particularly strong among the students on the German module. The Spanish tutor observed that it was more difficult to monitor participation and the use of the target language among their larger group. Both tutors agreed that a group size of approximately ten students would be preferable to groups of 25 for interactive LCS experiences.

Research Question 2: To what extent does such engagement in informal language learning spaces encourage foreign language learning?

The scores for the second question in the reflective report, intended to measure learning indicate that students provided either 'substantial evidence of learning with reasonably well developed responses and general examples given' (score of 3/4) or 'strong evidence of engagement with well-developed responses and specific examples provided in support of points made' (score of 4/4) (Table 4).

Table 4: Average scores in the reflective reports: Language learning

Language/Score	Question 2
German	3.67/4.00
Spanish	3.72/4.00

Illustrative comments from the student reflective reports include:

> I have become more fluent in German. I have learned that the language must be practiced. The language is very difficult but when I began, I studied a lot of vocabulary. This vocabulary was very useful when I used it in conversation. I have learned that I should not be afraid. Particularly when I speak. Everyone makes

mistakes and that is expected. Without these mistakes I cannot learn. I have also learnt to be more open. That is very important, because I am going to Germany and German is not my first language. I will have to speak to people that I do not know. I must get used to this and it is ok. [German]

I was also able to practice oral Spanish with my classmates, which gave me the opportunity to make mistakes and correct them in a safe environment. I was able to give and receive comments which improved my Spanish and made me feel more comfortable speaking in real life situations. I really enjoyed the classes and found them very useful. [Spanish]

In addition, the opportunity to practice and improve their oral skills was mentioned ten times in the end-of-module survey. One student commented that 'The best part was that all the activities were conversations activities so we could improve the fluency' [sic] [Spanish]. One commented that they would like the students to talk even more [Spanish]. This item was closely related to the informal learning environment discussed in terms of Research Question 1. Comments by the tutors reinforced this point noting that it was more successful in the smaller of the two groups.

Research Question 3: To what extent does such engagement in informal language learning appear to contribute to the development of language learner autonomy?

The scores for the third question in the reflective report indicate that students provided either 'substantial evidence of developing autonomy with reasonably well developed responses and general examples given' (score of 3/4) or 'strong evidence of developing autonomy with well-developed responses and specific examples provided in support of points made' (score

of 4/4) (Table 4). The concept of autonomy was operationalised for the purpose of this analysis as awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses as they relate to language development and concrete actions and plans to address these (Little 2022).

Table 5: Average scores in the reflective reports: Autonomy

Language/Score	Question 3
German	3.75/4
Spanish	3.72/4

Relevant extracts from the reflective reports include the following:

> Firstly, I think that I need to expand my vocabulary. I find that I often use the same words. Secondly, I need to improve my spoken fluency. I understand the different tenses and the grammar but I find it difficult to remember to use them when I am speaking. I also have to work on reminding myself of the gender of nouns. I also need to work on informal speaking for example in everyday life. All in all, I need to improve my speaking in general but I know that that will improve when I go to Germany. [German]

> The most important thing I need to improve is my confidence in speaking, try to speak more, even if I make some mistakes, try to do it anyway in order to improve this aspect. [Spanish]

Complementing these findings, the tutors stressed the link between the LCS experience and a growing realisation among students that a language is real and exists outside of formal classroom settings and the constraints of a university module.

I think it is good to meet in the LCS [...] because then they get more to think about language itself and using a target language and it is not as much about the module, it is more about the language [German Tutor].

Discussion

This paper reports on a pedagogical initiative intended to expand the PLE (Sockett 2023) of students studying German and Spanish in an Anglophone university context by integrating elements of informal language learning into formal language modules. The initiative was intended to acknowledge in practice the interdependent nature of formal and informal language learning (Alm, 2019) and, specifically, to address low levels of engagement with an informal university language learning space (the LCS) by domestic students. The research questions were addressed within an action research framework. Data was collected using attendance monitoring, student reflective reports, student surveys and a tutor debrief. Data analysis was carried out using quantitative analysis of the attendance data and student grades in the reflective reports, as well as TCA of the end-of-module surveys, triangulated using material from the reflective reports and the tutor debrief.

Important pedagogical features of the initiative were the integration of informal, relaxed, interactive, student-led sessions in the LCS into formal language modules and the use of low stakes assessment with a focus on attendance and reflection. The findings indicate that this approach succeeded in encouraging engagement with informal learning in a university context (Research Question 1). The high levels of attendance are likely to be related in particular to the nature of the assessment which included a score for attendance. However, many students attended more sessions than required to obtain a maximum score for attendance. This implies that while the nature of the assessment may have encouraged

attendance, it was not the only factor. The relaxed, enjoyable nature of the sessions which took place outside of a formal classroom setting also appear to have encouraged engagement echoing the arguments put forward by Lai and Lyu (2020) regarding the importance of informal spaces such as the LCS. Positive feedback regarding the absence of a prescribed learning framework appears to have also played a supporting role in the success of this initiative in line with McGivney's (2001) views on the centrality of this feature of informal language learning. These arguments are supported by the fact that participation in other events in the LCS also increased. Although the increased attendance at other LCS events cannot be directly attributed to the introduction of this initiative, it is likely to have played a role in encouraging it.

The findings also suggest that language learning took place (Research Question 2). Feedback from the students and tutors indicate that this learning concerned in particular the acquisition of oral fluency as well as vocabulary pertaining to everyday life. Similar outcomes were observed by Yung (2015) and discussed by Lai and Lyu (2020). The relaxed nature of the setting and the focus on speaking about everyday topics appeared to remove some of the anxiety often prevalent in more formal classrooms around speaking in a foreign language in front of peers and a lecturer.

The findings indicate student engagement with the assessment of their own strengths and weaknesses as well as with related goal-setting (Research Question 3). Following Little (2022), these activities were used to operationalise the concept of learner autonomy. These findings lend support to the views of Benson (2011), Chik (2008), Decius, Dannowksy and Shaper (2022), Hubbard (2020) and Murphy Odo (2020) that engagement with informal

language learning in university settings promotes the development of language learner autonomy.

Conclusion

This paper reports on a pedagogical initiative designed to integrate informal foreign language learning into university language modules. The findings indicate that the inclusion of informal, relaxed, interactive, student-led sessions, evaluated using low stakes assessment with a focus on attendance and reflection, encourages engagement with informal learning. It also supports language learning, particularly oral language learning and vocabulary acquisition, as well as the development of language learner autonomy. These findings support the integration of informal language learning in foreign language modules at university level. They also emphasize the importance of retaining the informal, relaxed nature of such sessions to ensure that the learning experience remains relaxed, enjoyable and student-led.

It should be borne in mind, nonetheless, that this paper reports on a single iteration of an AR study which are by their nature situation and context based with limited generalisability to other contexts (Koshy 2010). A second iteration of the initiative modified based on the results of this iteration will potentially produce even richer findings as will similar initiatives in other contexts. Other limitations include the relatively small sample size, the restriction of the study to two modules in two European languages and the use of self reporting by students to evidence language learning and the development of language learner autonomy. Future studies could include assessments of language proficiency and language learner autonomy as part of a longitudinal research design.

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