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“You will certainly learn English much faster at work than from a textbook.” – Law students learning English beyond the language classroom

Tuula Lehtonen

Language Centre, PO Box 4, 00014, University of Helsinki, Finland

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1. Introduction

Second language learning research tends to focus on learning in the classroom, but learning beyond the classroom has started to receive more attention in recent years (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Nunan & Richards, 2015; Pitkänen et al., 2011). This relatively new enquiry means interest in the learners and their choices in an environment that supports their self-directed, autonomous learning. This research often relies on the learners' reflective accounts revealing an area that other research methods are unable to cover.

Although language learning beyond the classroom is often treated as supplementary to what happens in the classroom (Benson, 2011, p. 9), learning in and beyond the classroom ideally support one another (Nunan & Richards, 2015, p. xv). It has been suggested in many studies that learning beyond the classroom yields the best learning outcomes if out-of-class activities form a planned, supported part of the class or course (see e.g. Chern & Dooley, 2014; Lai, Zhu, & Gong, 2014; Sayer, 2010).

Research on language learning beyond the language classroom tends to set the learner in a context. For example, learning is treated as life-long, life-wide and life-deep (e.g. Karlsson & Kjisik, 2011); seen as complementary to classroom activities (e.g. Gilliland, 2015) or bridging the classroom and the environment in which the students live (e.g. Chern & Dooley, 2014; Sayer, 2010); viewed as study abroad experiences (e.g. Macalister, 2015); studied with the help of students' learning histories (e.g. Menezes, 2011); explored in the context of work (e.g. Lehtonen, 2011); studied to understand the quality of out-of-class English learning (e.g. Lai et al., 2014) and approached from the point of view of immigrants at a work placement (e.g. Sandwall, 2010). Language learning beyond the classroom, at its best, creates authentic, meaningful, autonomous and often social learning opportunities where meaning-making plays an important role (see e.g. Benson & Reinders, 2011). This type of learning often happens because the task is to use, communicate, understand and be understood. An example within the English as a Lingua Franca approach has been offered by Ke and Cahyani (2014) in their study where English as a Foreign Language learners transform into English as a Lingua Franca users.

Because of globalisation, English is used everywhere, including the workplace. Because this environment is likely to enhance learning of English beyond the classroom of interns or new employees in non-English speaking countries, this area

E-mail address: tuula.lehtonen@helsinki.fi.

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needs to be studied. It can be assumed that even if students or recent graduates are skilful to start with, they learn a lot in their first encounters with the world of work, and continue to do so when changing jobs. A survey in Finland shows that employees who graduated five years previously indicated a gap between the skills taught at university and those helpful at work: the respondents reported that their university education could have better prepared them in negotiation skills, organization and coordination skills, team work and other social skills, presentation skills and project management skills (Lindholm, 2011, p. 1). These findings suggest that the group of graduates was not as ready as they could have been, but at the same time, it is reasonable to expect that they continued to fill the gap they had perceived. Indeed, to succeed, in addition to solid subject knowledge, a university graduate needs good communication and other “soft skills”, such as working in a team (see Lehtonen & Karjalainen, 2008; Lehtonen & Karjalainen, 2009).

Knowing more about foreign language learning in intern/traineeships (from now on internships) or at the initial stages of graduates' careers is important to language teachers in higher education because this knowledge helps us provide meaningful learning opportunities to students soon moving to the job market. This knowledge also adds to the bulk of literature on language learning beyond the language classroom.

This article revolves around English learning possibilities at work to novices in the field of law. The data come from my soon-to-graduate Master's in Law students during their time as junior lawyers/interns in positions that, according to the data, are similar to those they will have after graduation. These students, in general, are motivated and successful learners who seek for opportunities to learn English and other workplace skills. This article, stemming from my desire to better comprehend my teaching context and curricular rationale, describes how my students report, in writing, on their language learning in their work/internships and how this learning might form a necessary interim stage between university studies and the workplace, on the students' way to becoming experts ready for the future and the constant new demands.

My aims are to use student self-reports collected as part of an optional degree requirement to 1) highlight typical features related to language use and learning at work of Master's in Law students in Finland in their gradual transition from university to work and 2) consider the relevance of this information to the teaching of English in higher education and to learning beyond the classroom research.

2. Theoretical background

Three complementary approaches help in understanding the data: language learning beyond the classroom, the idea of community of practice and the ecological approach to language learning. These approaches interpret people as learning in interaction with their environment and other people. In other words, learning is not seen as only happening within the mind of an individual.

2.1. Benson's framework

Research on language learning beyond the classroom allows us to focus on students' perceptions of a context which acts as a follow-up to their classroom learning and in which they may participate for reasons other than language learning. This is a context that language teachers have little access to because we normally no longer hear from our students at this stage (see Benson, 2011).

Language learning beyond the language classroom has what Benson (2011, pp. 8–12) calls “four different dimensions” that help define the field and distinguish it from research on in-classroom learning. Benson's first dimension is location. Benson lists a number of examples of learning beyond the language classroom taking place out-of-classroom. Some of these are connected to or supplementary to learning in the classroom. One of his examples is one-to-one tutorials that students offer to their juniors to earn some money (Benson, 2011, p. 10) – a context where some type of novice-expert relationship is formed. In Benson's framework, the remaining three dimensions, explained below, are related to location.

Benson's second dimension, formality, implies “the degree to which learning is independent of organized courses leading to formal qualifications” (p. 10). Language classrooms in an institutional setting are an example of formal learning, providing the learners with a framework that is normally created by the teacher. However, today's foreign language learners have several possibilities to learn informally because of digitalization, for example. They learn even though, or possibly because, there is no curriculum. Benson's third dimension consists of pedagogy seen as a continuum from instructed to self-instructed or naturalistic learning. Instructed learning refers to learning through formal processes that aim to teach. In contrast, in self-instruction the learner aims to learn by using books or any material instead of having an instructor; in what Benson calls “self-directed naturalistic learning”, the learner immerses herself in a naturalistic learning situation to learn but soon shifts her attention from language learning to other issues, such as communication. The fourth dimension is formed by the learner's locus of control, in other words, who chooses what and how to learn and teach. The learner may choose to learn in an instructional setting or may opt out. Benson (2011, p. 12) writes: “Locus of control shifts back to learners when they gain confidence in their ability to learn in more naturalistic, informal ways.”

Benson (2011, p. 13) specifies that “the locations in which language learning beyond the classroom take place [...] are perhaps more usefully thought of as social spaces, or ‘settings’ for language learning.” Thus settings “offer affordances for and constraints on possibilities for language learning” (Benson, 2011, p. 13) and act as arrangements for learning where learners

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