

Original Paper

Informal Learning For Pre-service English Teachers in a Chinese Context: A Case Study

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Abstract

Informal learning, recognized for its flexibility and autonomy, is increasingly important in the context of teacher education. However, research on its application and effectiveness in non-Western settings, particularly in China, remains limited. So this study aims to analyze English education major students' awareness, methods, values, support, and outcomes related to informal learning. A questionnaire survey was conducted among 604 students to gather quantitative data across five key dimensions. Results indicate that while students recognize the importance of informal learning, their understanding of its concept is limited, leading to inconsistent application. Besides, a strong reliance on online resources suggests a need for more diverse strategies. Students also seek better integration of informal learning with formal education and more effective teacher guidance. Although institutional support is present, its utilization varies, and there is significant support for formalizing informal learning outcomes to enhance academic credentials and employability. In conclusion, this study highlights the need for enhanced strategies to better integrate and support informal learning in Chinese teacher education, offering actionable recommendations for educators and policymakers.

Keywords

informal learning, English teachers, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

English education majors, as to-be English teachers, are central to the study of educational models and learning approaches. In recent years, informal learning (informal learning) has gradually attracted the attention of the education sector due to its flexibility and autonomy. Informal learning generally refers to forms of learning that are intentional or deliberate but are not institutionalised. It is consequently less organized and structured than either formal or non-formal education. Informal learning may include learning activities that occur in the family, workplace, local community and daily life, on a self-directed,

family-directed or socially-directed basis.

For those digital natives (Prensky, 2001), the opportunities for informal language learning have expanded significantly, far beyond the traditional classroom setting (Reinders & Benson, 2017). For pre-service English teachers in particular, informal learning, characterized by its non-standardized and fragmented nature, has proven to be an effective, sustainable, and personalized approach to learning. It provides an opportunity for participatory learning and self-directed learning, allowing learners to pursue knowledge and resources according to their own needs (Livingstone, 2001). This form of learning not only supplements formal classroom learning but also enhances students' comprehensive abilities and promotes self-regulated learning (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004). Although the many benefits of informal learning in improving the competence of pre-service English teachers have been widely recognized, relevant research has mostly focused on Western contexts and paid less attention to non-Western contexts, especially Chinese practice. More importantly, there are only 694 literatures on informal learning in CNKI, of which only 32 are devoted to teachers' informal learning. This shows that in the Chinese context, the application and effect of informal learning in teacher education are still not fully discussed.

In addition, China's informal learning environment also faces problems such as uneven use of Internet resources and insufficient teacher guidance, which have not received sufficient attention in existing research. Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges and opportunities of informal learning in pre-service English teacher education in China, in order to provide new insights into its effective application in China.

This study focuses on understanding the informal learning experiences of English education majors at a local teacher training college. Specifically, it will analyze students' awareness, methods, values support and outcomes in informal learning. The research will use a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys to gather quantitative data on learning practices and interviews to gain deeper qualitative insights into students' needs and difficulties. The findings aim to offer practical recommendations for educators and policymakers to enhance support for informal learning in teacher education.

2. Method

2.1 Methodological Approach

This study utilized a questionnaire survey to investigate the informal learning behaviors of English education majors at a local teacher training college in Chongqing, China. The choice of a survey method was driven by the need to efficiently gather data from a large sample, allowing for the identification of prevalent trends and patterns across different academic levels.

Participants are students majoring in English education in a local normal university in Chongqing, China, including 223 freshmen, 221 sophomores and 160 juniors to junior year. Among them, 102 are male and 502 are female.

2.2 Online Survey

The survey was conducted online. A total of 630 questionnaires were distributed, and 604 valid questionnaires are retrieved, with an effective rate of 95.9%. The survey is structured around five dimensions: awareness, methods, values, support, outcomes. The basic information of the survey respondents 3 questions, five dimensions of a total of 28 design questions, using a five-point Likert scale (5 points =very compliant 1 point =Completely do not comply with). The total sample reliability ronbach α coefficient is 0.961, which can better support the analysis of the current situation of this topic; questionnaire validity KMO is 0.959.

The questionnaire was structured around five key dimensions:

1	Awareness	Assessed students' recognition and understanding of informal learning, including their awareness of learning opportunities outside the classroom.
2	Methods	Focused on the strategies students use for informal learning, such as online resources and self-directed learning techniques.
3	Values	Explored students' attitudes towards the importance of informal learning and its integration with formal education.
4	Support	Examined the external resources and support available to students, including institutional resources and teacher guidance.
5	Outcomes	Measured the perceived and actual results of informal learning, such as skill development and academic performance.

Each dimension was designed to capture specific aspects of students' informal learning experiences, offering a comprehensive view of their learning beyond the classroom.

3. Result

3.1 Informal Learning for Pre-service English Teachers in General

The questionnaire results revealed varying levels of engagement and perception across the five dimensions(Awareness, Methods, Values, Support and Outcomes) of informal learning among English education majors. The sample data in Table 1 indicate that most participants rated their academic performance as “good” or “average”.

Table 1. The Basic Situation of Pre-service English Teacher

	Self-evaluation to academic performance			
	excellent	good	average	Poor
Sample size	59	300	221	24
Rate	9.77%	49.67%	36.59%	3.97%

3.2 High Awareness but Limited Understanding of Informal Learning

From the result of awareness dimension, pre-service English teachers exhibit a high level of awareness regarding the importance of informal learning, though their understanding of the concept itself remains limited. Students recognize the critical role of informal learning in their university education, with a mean score of 3.726 for awareness and a high score of 4.212 for the statement on after-class self-directed learning. They strongly believe in the ubiquity of learning opportunities, as reflected by a mean score of 4.116 for the idea that "university learning can happen anytime and anywhere." Additionally, the recognition that 80% of learning occurs outside the classroom, with a mean score of 3.712, highlights the importance they place on informal learning.

However, despite this high level of awareness, there is a noticeable gap in students' concrete understanding of what constitutes informal learning, as reflected by the mean score of less than 3 for the statement "I understand the concept of informal learning." This finding suggests that while students are aware of and engage in informal learning practices, there is a need for clearer definitions and better conceptual education regarding informal learning to fully harness its benefits.

Table 2. Survey of English Normal College Students' Awareness

Survey Questions on Awareness	Average
University learning can occur anytime and anywhere.	4.116
University knowledge and skills: 20% from class, 80% from outside class.	3.712
I pursue learning through various methods even without external pressures. (e.g., exams)	3.682
The main difference between university and high school learning is independent study after class.	4.212
I investigate and study classroom content further after class.	3.490
I participate in extracurricular activities to enhance my skills and knowledge	3.702
I understand the concept of informal learning	2.870

3.3 Diverse Methods but Heavy Reliance on Online Resources

The survey results show that pre-service English teachers primarily rely on online resources for informal learning, as reflected by the average score of 3.701. Students frequently use digital platforms to access learning materials, with a significant number demonstrating a clear understanding of how to find and utilize these resources. For instance, the mean agreement score of 3.796 for the statement "I know that many high-quality primary and secondary school model lessons and learning resources come from the Learning Power app" underscores the central role of such applications in their learning processes.

This heavy reliance on online resources may indicate a lack of diversity in learning methods, suggesting that students could benefit from exploring a wider range of informal learning paths beyond the digital environment.

Table 3. Survey of Survey of English Normal College Students' Methods

Survey Questions on Methods	Average
I use online resources to learn through observation and imitation.	3.866
I have effective methods for learning outside of class.	3.631
I enjoy discussing educational and academic issues with classmates and teachers	3.613
I know where to find various learning resources outside of class.	3.651
I know that many high-quality K-12 lessons and resources come from the online app.	3.796

3.4 Strong Demand for Integration and Teacher Guidance in Informal Learning

This integration is viewed as crucial for enhancing their comprehensive abilities and teaching proficiency. The data show that students highly value a variety of learning activities that can address these needs, with a mean agreement score of 3.772 for the statement that major assignments should be integrated with other activities. Additionally, there is a significant demand for effective teacher guidance in informal learning. The mean score of 3.790 for the desire for teacher guidance highlights the students' reliance on their instructors to provide direction in these activities. Students also expect that the objectives, content, and evaluation systems of informal learning activities be designed to be efficient, interesting, and valuable, as reflected in the mean score of 3.442 for the clarity and value of extracurricular activity goals. Furthermore, the survey reveals also that students are generally satisfied with the extracurricular transcript system, though the mean score of 3.336 suggests that there is room for improvement.

Within this dimension, the findings underscore the importance of structured support and the thoughtful design of informal learning activities to ensure they are both engaging and effective.

Table 4. Survey of English Normal College Students' Values

Survey Questions on Needs and Values	Average
I hope major assignments can be integrated with other activities.	3.772
I am satisfied with the school's extracurricular transcript system.	3.336
The goals and content of extracurricular activities are clear and valuable.	3.442
I manage my extracurricular time well.	3.507
I want effective guidance from teachers for my extracurricular learning and activities.	3.790

3.5 Adequate Support but Limited Resource Utilization

The survey results indicate that while pre-service English teachers generally perceive adequate support for informal learning at their university, the utilization of these resources varies. The overall mean score for the Support and Environment dimension was 3.569, reflecting a generally positive but not fully optimized support environment. Students recognized the availability of learning resources and facilities,

with a mean score of 3.778, and felt that the university fosters an atmosphere conducive to independent learning (mean score: 3.483). However, reliance on teachers for after-school resources remains significant, as indicated by a lower mean score of 3.211 for teacher guidance.

The "informal learning certification" (Note 1) task was seen as meaningful, suggesting that while initiatives exist, further efforts are needed to ensure broader participation and resource utilization.

Table 5. Survey of English Normal College Students' Support and Environment

Survey Questions on Support and Environment	Average
The atmosphere for self-regulated learning outside of class is strong.	3.483
University spaces support and provide ample room for outside-class learning.	3.311
There are many channels and abundant resources for learning materials.	3.778
The network environment supports various extracurricular learning activities.	3.538
Facilities and equipment meet our needs for after-class study.	3.490
Teachers offer effective guidance and recommend resources.	3.211
The “informal learning certification” task is clear and straightforward.	3.376

3.6 Strong Support for Formalizing Informal Learning Outcomes with Tangible Benefits

The survey results reveal that pre-service English teachers overwhelmingly support the formal recognition and certification of informal learning outcomes, seeing it as a valuable addition to their academic credentials and future employability.

The score of 3.656 for the desire to see extracurricular activities result in tangible outcomes, such as micro-lessons, videos, projects, awards, or certificates, underscores this strong inclination. Additionally, students showed a clear preference for linking these activities to academic credits, with a mean score of 3.591, indicating that formalizing these learning outcomes would not only motivate participation but also enhance the perceived value of informal learning. Moreover, the survey data suggest that students believe formalizing and recording their informal learning achievements, such as through digital profiles, would better demonstrate their professional skills and ethical standards, which are crucial for their future roles as educators. The mean score of 3.646 for the statement about envisioning a complete record of learning and achievements, including a digital profile, reinforces this perspective.

From this dimension, the findings indicate that students strongly advocate for the institutional recognition of informal learning, understanding its significant role in improving their employability and professional development.

Table 6. Survey of English Normal College Students' Result and Outcome

Survey Questions on Result and Outcome	Average
I hope extracurricular learning activities result in tangible outcomes, such as micro-lessons, videos, projects, awards, certificates, or reflections.	3.656
I want extracurricular activities to be recognized and linked to academic credits.	3.591
I envision a complete record of my learning and achievements, including a digital profile.	3.646
I hope extracurricular activities can be quantified and converted into credits, such as through badges.	3.601
I will actively participate in certifications for extracurricular activities.	3.680

4. Discussion

4.1 Limited Understanding of Informal Learning but High Awareness among Pre-service English Teachers

Pre-service English teachers have a limited understanding of the concept of informal learning, yet they generally recognize its necessity and maintain a positive attitude towards it. This is consistent with Livingstone's (2001) definition of informal learning as any learning activity occurring outside the curricula of educational institutions. Despite their awareness, the implementation of informal learning among these pre-service English teachers remains underdeveloped. This finding is also supported by Godwin-Jones (2018), who noted that while the process of second language learning increasingly occurs outside institutional settings, the effectiveness of such informal learning environments is not always maximized.

4.2 Narrow Range of Paths and Methods in Informal Learning

Pre-service Pre-service English teachers are capable of utilizing network resources for independent learning and can independently obtain extracurricular learning resources. Some pre-service English teachers have developed a structured self-learning system and exhibit a high degree of self-awareness in informal learning. However, in the digital age, these students struggle to efficiently leverage network resources for informal learning, often confined to "information cocoon" (Reinders & Benson, 2017). This inefficiency and lack of diversity in information sources not only reduces the potential of available resources but can also lead to "learning laziness" or even excessive dependence on digital media, thereby inhibiting independent thinking (Prensky, 2001).

4.3 Need for Integration of Informal Learning Activities with Classroom Instruction

Pre-service English teachers express a strong desire for integrating informal learning with formal classroom activities to create structured and effective extracurricular learning experiences. They seek to acquire systematic knowledge and skills through such activities and expect guidance from their teachers. However, current extracurricular learning activities often suffer from unclear objectives and disorganized processes, which diminishes their effectiveness (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004). This need

for better integration is also echoed in studies that emphasize the role of informal learning in complementing formal education (Berman, 2020). Formal education provides structured frameworks of knowledge, while informal learning can complement these frameworks and help students to apply what they have learned in a broader context. On the other hand, the process of integration must be handled with care in order to avoid transforming informal learning into another form of formal learning, thereby losing its independent value.

4.4 Availability of Rich On-campus Learning Resources for Pre-service English Teachers

The survey revealed that schools provide a conducive environment for extracurricular independent learning, offering facilities like teacher skills training rooms. Pre-service English teachers now have access to a variety of learning resources provided by teachers and other sources, with many schools implementing "informal learning certification" programs¹ online to encourage independent learning (Ali Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021). However, the popularization of these resources remains insufficient, and due to a lack of information, some students are unaware of these learning channels, resulting in low resource utilization (Livingstone, 2001).

4.5 Linking Informal Learning Achievements to Credits Can Enhance Independent Learning among Pre-service English Teachers

Most pre-service English teachers agree that the outcomes of informal learning should be formally recognized and linked to academic credits. This approach could enhance students' motivation and make informal learning more organized and effective under the guidance of schools and teachers (Uhunoma, Lim, & Kim, 2020). However, the combination of formal and informal learning does not mean that informal learning loses its uniqueness altogether, but rather that it is integrated in a flexible way that enables students to engage in self-directed learning in a more supportive environment. However, it is important to be wary of over-prescriptiveness, as this may weaken the essential character of informal learning. The ultimate goal should be to create a balance whereby informal learning can complement formal education more effectively while maintaining its flexibility.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzed the informal learning behaviors among English education students to offer insights on students' awareness, methods, values, support and outcomes of informal learning, seeking to address the gap in understanding how informal learning manifests in the Chinese context. First, despite students' high awareness of the importance of informal learning, its actual implementation is unsatisfactory, particularly in terms of significantly deficient use of information resources and the diversification of learning paths. This aligns with previous research indicating that the process of second language learning is increasingly occurring outside of institutional settings, yet the effectiveness of such informal learning environments remains inconsistent (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Second, there is a strong demand for the integration of informal learning with learning activities, but there is still considerable room for improvement in the design and guidance of activities within schools. In addition,

although schools provide support for informal learning, students' knowledge and utilization of these resources are still low. Linking the outcomes of informal learning to academic credits could help improve students' motivation and learning effectiveness in independent learning (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004).

In summary, this study not only reveals the existing challenges in informal learning among English education majors but also underscores the need for targeted strategies to improve the integration and effectiveness of these learning practices in the Chinese context. By addressing these gaps, educators and policymakers can enhance the overall quality of English teacher education. Future research should continue to explore how to optimize informal learning environments through improved resource allocation, better-designed learning activities, and closer integration with formal education programs.

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Note

Note 1. Informal learning certification: It refers to a micro-credential system used by some Chinese universities to formally recognize skills gained through informal learning activities. These certifications are typically awarded through short, focused modules, acknowledged with digital badges or certificates.