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Comparing autonomous and class-based learners in Brazil: Evidence for the present-day advantages of informal, out-of-class learning



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 May 2016

Received in revised form 21 July 2016

Accepted 22 July 2016

Available online 31 July 2016

ABSTRACT

In the last ten years, there has been a steady increase in reported cases of successful high-level acquisition by out-of-classroom, informal learners through the affordances of the Internet, while mainstream SLA research has continued to focus on instructed learning contexts with assessments often relying on classroom-based tasks. In this article, we report a study comparing high-level, well-motivated Central Brazilian classroom-trained learners (CTLs) with fully autonomous self-instructed learners (FASILs). Thirty-four FASILs and fifty CTLs, matched for socio-economic status, age, educational level and years of English learning, were assessed on seven distinct but related aspects of language proficiency, completed a questionnaire and were interviewed to gather data on behaviour, beliefs and attitudes. FASILs scored significantly higher than CTLs on all assessments while questionnaires and interviews revealed key differences in attitudes and motivational development. Mode of learning correlated significantly with grammatical and lexical knowledge and range, with detailed analysis indicating that fossilized errors in high-frequency structures were significantly more common among CTLs than FASILs. The results reveal how the new affordances for naturalistic learning through the Internet have transformed informal language learning, enabling significant numbers of independent, informal learners in foreign language contexts to achieve very high levels of proficiency.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in learning beyond the classroom (e.g., [Benson & Reinders, 2011](#)), largely as a result of the popularity and affordances of new technology that [Benson \(2011a\)](#) has stated provide for the first time “opportunities for language learners ... to bypass classrooms and go directly to TL texts and users” (p. 17). In fact, at least with respect to English, the classroom may no longer even be the dominant language learning context ([Sokkett, 2014](#)). With the emergence of the Internet and the concomitant rise of English as a *lingua franca*, the language has come to have a new functional role in the everyday lives of non-native English users all over the world.

However, as Cynthia White wrote some 20 years ago, “Our understanding of the varied means learners use to learn a second or foreign language has been artificially limited by an almost exclusive focus on learners in conventional classroom

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environments” (White, 1995:218). In our view, this continues to be the case. In Benson’s terms, little has changed over the intervening years, “the overwhelming dominance of classroom-based studies in the field of language education creates the impression that foreign languages are mainly learned in classrooms” (Benson, 2011b: 77). In this respect, there is an obvious mismatch between the volume of classroom-based research in SLA, even with regard to teacher-guided, autonomous learning, and the present-day realities of informal, out-of-class foreign language learning and use in foreign language contexts. The present study, comparing the performances of fully autonomous English language learners (FASILs) with a matched group of classroom-based learners (CTLs) on a battery of seven English language tests, together with their attitudes, beliefs and motivational development, attempts to show the current potential of naturalistic learning, without formal support and occurring outside of a native-speaking country, to bring adult users to native-like proficiency.

In our view, it is important to provide evidence indicating that ‘acquisition’, or informal, out-of-class-learning in the present day context, might produce better outcomes for learners than ‘learning’ in traditional classroom-based environments. We know that many learners face substantial hurdles including fossilized error-laden forms in their interlanguages at higher levels of proficiency, even after many years of formal instruction. Through examining carefully the data from and practices of proficient autonomous learners in comparison to highly-trained classroom learners, we may be better able to put what happens in the classroom in perspective by identifying constraints unique to the classroom as well as unique benefits of other learning contexts. In this way, we may be able to revise classroom-based language learning models to reflect key aspects of informal learning which lead to improved proficiency at higher levels without fossilization of key forms.

2. Current evidence from the literature

An important affordance of Internet use contexts is that they allow access to target language (TL) communities of relevance to the learner, a fact that several SLA researchers have noted can lead to huge jumps in acquisition. Eva Lam, for instance, conducted a number of case studies (2000, 2004, 2006) on Chinese immigrant teenagers in America who were de-motivated in school but who discovered the language to great effect using English within virtual communities of TL users with shared interests. Black (2006) reported on a similar case in which unsuccessful classroom learners experienced great improvements in their English as they became valued members in the online fan-fiction community.

There have been similar findings with respect to foreign language learning. Murray (2008) reported on Japanese informal English learners who were driven to learn English by their emotional connection to English language pop-culture despite a lack of interest in English as a school subject. Benson and Chik (2010) reported on two different formal Hong Kong learners, who, as self-professed English language users, credited their high level proficiency to interaction with their favored media and with other members of the virtual community.

Within the European context, Leppänen, Pitkänen-Huhta, Piirainen-Marsh, Nikula, and Peuronen (2009) describe how four young Finns gained complex multi-lingual identities by connecting to online speaking communities. A case study by Kuure (2011), detailed the English user behaviour of a Finnish teenager who was exposed to a huge amount of specialized vocabulary as his online video game world expanded to a complex web of TL user communities.

Other researchers have pointed out the widespread nature of learning through informal sources today. In a European commission report, Stevens and Shield (2010) conclude that there is a substantial and growing number of students operating in personalized learning/use environments (PLEs) who often surpass their teachers in their informal linguistic knowledge. Several studies report on acquisition through exposure to ubiquitous English language pop-culture. Housen, Janssens, and Pierrard (2001), for example, found that despite studying French for significantly more hours than English, Belgian students had acquired significantly better English proficiency. More recently, Rindal (2010) found that though standard British English was the instructed variety in Norwegian schools, American English phonological variants dominated the speech patterns of Norwegian secondary school students. He concluded, “It is difficult to avoid the impression that learners’ pronunciation is influenced by spoken media ...” (p. 256).

In a recent book, Geoffrey Sockett (2014) elaborates on studies that he and his colleagues at the University of Strasbourg conducted on what he terms “the online informal learning of English (OILE)”. The studies empirically document the widespread nature of informal learning and its potential to lead to acquisition. For example, a survey of 208 Strasbourg students found that all of them listened to English language music, with 30% (41) listening for at least three hours a day, and 33% (42) affirming that they only listened to English language music. In a separate study, Kusyik and Sockett (2012) found that 50% of Information Technology (IT) students watched English television weekly (Kusyik & Sockett, 2012: 51).

The findings of the Kusyik and Sockett (2012) study revealed the advantages for vocabulary acquisition enjoyed by frequent television viewers over non-frequent viewers. Results indicated that frequent viewers were significantly more likely to have acquired common 4 word chunks from a corpus of television scripts than infrequent viewers, despite having gone through equivalent formal training. A follow-up study revealed a statistically significant relationship between frequency of television viewing and written use of the 50 most common chunks.

3. Theories of second language acquisition, present and past, and their relationship to modern, naturalistic acquisition outside the classroom

Almost certainly the most influential theoretical position with respect to the constraints of formal learning is found in Stephen Krashen’s five hypotheses and, specifically, the distinction drawn between what he terms “learning” and

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