Informal language learning in the digital age: What, why and how?

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Online informal language learning refers to independent second language acquisition by individuals through engagement with a variety of digital resources—such as online video, music, and social networks—which are not specifically designed for learning. Recent studies (e.g. Sockett, 2014) indicate that, as a result of changes in technology and the concomitant emergence of a globalised culture, this type of learning is becoming more common. There is even some evidence to suggest that individuals who mainly engage in this type of learning outperform highly-motivated and well-educated classroom-trained learners in tasks measuring a range of linguistic knowledge and skills (Cole, 2015).

The presentation proposed will discuss the provisional methodology for my doctoral research, the goal of which is to explore in more detail what motivates individuals to engage with second language online materials in their free time; what the nature of this engagement is; whether there is a relationship between individual learners’ motivation and attitudes towards the target language and their engagement; as well as what the relationship is between these factors and emerging language proficiency. These questions will be addressed at three levels, designed to progressively ’zoom in’ on the learning process: At the macro level, large-scale survey data will be used to statistically model the relationships between the aforementioned variables. A quasi-experimental study involving pre- and post-tests of language proficiency combined with detailed journal records of online activities will constitute the meso level, while at the micro level, methods such as eye-tracking, screen-captures, and prompted recall could be combined to study how motivations and attitudes relate to strategies and behaviour at the very moment of learning.


Keywords: digital learning, informal language learning, attitudes and motivation.