Research on learning English outside the classroom

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Introduction

The relative advantages of learning a second language in a formal classroom setting versus ‘picking it up’ in a natural or informal context have long been debated. An early second language acquisition (SLA) theory proposed by Krashen (1981) held that there was a fundamental distinction between L2 acquisition and learning. He argued that true language acquisition came not from consciously studying language rules and grammatical structures, but rather unconsciously through receiving significant amounts of input in the target language. Although most contemporary SLA researchers reject the strong version of the learning versus acquisition distinction (called a ‘non-interface position’, cf. MacWhinney’s (2008) ‘Competition Model’), many note that successful L2 learners often have many opportunities for informal learning. In L2 teaching, immersion and study abroad programmes are modelled after input-intensive approaches (Christian 2006). However, most younger students in the world still learn English predominantly through traditional face-to-face classroom instruction. This reality prompts the questions: what is the current state of research on children’s informal L2 English learning? What is the potential for out-of-school L2 English learning for younger learners?

Disconnects between early L2 learning outside the classroom and SLA research

Mainstream SLA research dating back to the 1960s has tended to focus on adult or late adolescent learners (Myles 2010). Central concepts such as interlanguage, native/non-native speakers, and target language were developed within a cognitivist framework that assumed these were relatively fixed and unproblematic. Within the past decade applied linguists approaching SLA from a sociocultural orientation (Atkinson 2011; Block 2003) have argued that SLA theory needs to account far better for the social aspects of L2 learning, such as the social context and learner’s identity. Likewise, Ortega (2013) has argued that SLA should take a ‘bi/multilingual turn’, which would include attention to heretofore neglected areas such as child early second language acquisition and bilingual first language
It is our opinion that when considering young L2 learners’ use of English we need to expand our view of what counts as engagements with the target language. New language policies have been instrumental in creating programmes to teach English in the primary grades; the introduction of these programmes has lowered the age at which many students begin to study the language, and have – some significantly – expanded the amount of instruction they receive (Cha and Ham 2008; Enever 2012). The expansion of formal English instruction mirrors another trend: the expansion of opportunities children have for informal language learning outside of school (Edelenbos et al. 2006). While the research to date on early L2 English programmes has grown, focusing mostly on policies, pedagogy and acquisition, the role of children’s exposure and use of English outside the classroom remains largely unexplored (cf. Nikolov and Mihaljevic Djigunovic 2011). Murphy (2014) explains that young learners’ opportunities to use English are shaped by the social context beyond the classroom. However, typically, and especially in countries in the expanding circle or English as a foreign language (EFL varieties) settings as defined by Kachru (1990), the assumption is that the amount of exposure children have to English outside of class time is quite restricted because the language is not widely used in the social context (Sayer and Ban 2014).

We would argue that, on the contrary, using English in informal settings outside class now forms part of many children’s everyday lives, even in so-called EFL settings. There is a growing recognition amongst researchers that as English has become established as the global lingua franca, children are increasingly being exposed to and engaging with English in diverse social activities. English continues to gain prominence in global popular culture (McKay and Bokhorst-Heng 2008), mainly through television, movies, music, videogames and online social networks. As they live more of their lives online, accessibility to English through digital venues is becoming ever more relevant to children in many countries. The Internet and other emerging platforms, such as smartphone applications (apps), often lead to incidental exposure and learning of English. Whereas there used to be a strong ‘digital divide’ across countries and socioeconomic status, more people from more diverse backgrounds are now connected and possibilities to use and learn English informally have thus expanded (Thorne et al. 2009).

Therefore, an examination of early learning of L2 English outside the classroom considers aspects of L2 learning that are not necessarily aligned with research done in mainstream SLA. As Ortega (2013) has pointed out, the bi/multilingual turn will broaden the scope of SLA work, and it will also challenge applied linguists to confront the gaps where existing (and previously agreed upon) theories and concepts need to be stretched or re-thought. We can think of these as ‘disconnects’ between the traditional focus of SLA research and the areas into which we need to extend current research in order to contemplate young learners’ out-of-school L2 experiences. These disconnects include:

- Research on SLA and research on bilingualism.
- Research on adults and younger L2 learners.
- Research on L2 learning inside (instructed) and outside (informal/naturalistic) the classroom.
- The distinction between incidental and informal L2 learning.
- The learning of L2s in digital or virtual spaces versus other ‘real’ social environments.

In this chapter, we will refer to these disconnects as we review and synthesise work on children’s informal learning of English beyond school settings.
Historical perspectives

Most of our learning in daily life occurs without receiving explicit instruction. Cross (2007) argues that learning happens as we figure out how to participate in our social and work spaces, and that this ‘informal learning is the unofficial, unscheduled, impromptu ways people learn to do their jobs’ (Cross 2007, p. 19). Learning is, then, very much a quotidian and ‘situated’ activity that is part-and-parcel of living and working (Lave and Wenger 1991). Aligned with this approach, Toffoli and Sockett (2010) hold that informal language learning is best understood within socioconstructivist models, where learning is seen as a co-constructed activity – carrying out meaningful tasks with others – in a social environment. However, in the history of the development of research on second language acquisition, young children’s informal L2 learning has been largely overlooked.

Research on informal L2 learning

There are two related ways of approaching out-of-school language learning, as informal or incidental L2 learning. The distinction is not always clear. ‘Incidental’ refers to language learning that happens when the L2 user is trying to accomplish something else through the language, without the intention or focus on improving her or his language. Gass (1999, p. 319) defines it as ‘a by-product of other cognitive exercises involving comprehension’. In this sense, incidental learning is contrasted with intentional learning, either in a classroom or self-instructed setting, and has long been studied in SLA, even if researchers did not frame it as such. Hulstijn (2003) points out that the term incidental learning in SLA research has usually been applied to work on vocabulary, but almost not at all on work in areas of phonology or grammar. However, he points out that well-known studies such as Doughty’s (1991) study of adult L2 learners’ acquisition of relative clauses clearly examine incidental learning, since although the learners were in a classroom setting, the main focus of instruction was not on relative clauses.1 ‘Informal’ on the other hand refers to language learning that happens outside a traditional classroom setting. Informal may well be intentional, for example, purposively changing the audio track on the television to English or studying song lyrics in order to practise. Informal learning may also be incidental, such as when a child is playing a video game in English. For our purposes here, we will equate L2 learning outside the classroom as informal learning, since ‘informal’ usually refers to both the context (a ‘naturalistic’ setting, not in-school instruction) whereas ‘incidental’ refers to the intentional-ity of the learning (whether in a classroom setting or not).

Some early work in SLA did examine learners in informal settings, although it was not explicitly framed as informal L2 learning. Krashen’s (1981) formulation of his monitor model included a whole chapter on ‘formal and informal linguistic environments in language acquisition and language learning’. An important insight he and other researchers had at the time was that L2 exposure is necessary but by itself does not guarantee L2 intake. However, the studies from the 60s and 70s that Krashen reviews are with L2 adult learners, which he contrasts with L1 child acquisition. Two other early seminal studies in SLA are case studies of informal language learning. Schumann’s (1978) study of Albert, an L2 learner from Costa Rica, noted that despite extended time living in the United States, Albert’s English was still marked by many ungrammatical or ‘pidgin’ forms. Schumann posited that the problem with Albert’s L2 progression was not linguistic, but rather that he felt he was not a part of and therefore rejected the culture he connected with English, a theory Schumann called the acculturation model. Likewise, Schmidt’s (1983) study of Wes, an adult Japanese
learner of English living in Hawaii, traced how he developed aspects of his L2. Schmidt used the notion of *communicative competence* (Hymes 1972; Canale and Swain 1980) as a framework. By carefully describing how Wes, a talented artist who interacted frequently with English speakers, used his ‘broken’ English successfully in his everyday dealing with people, Schmidt showed that Wes was an effective communicator despite deficiencies in his L2 grammatical system. That is, whereas by traditional SLA measures Wes would be considered a poor L2 learner, the data demonstrated that in many settings he was clearly a successful language learner, in spite of his lack of grammatical accuracy.

These early case studies were of adult L2 learners. Researchers looking at children in similar contexts usually did not frame their work as ‘SLA research’, but rather research on bilingualism. They typically focused on questions relevant to bilingual development, such as the relation of the two languages in the brain (what is the nature of a unitary or underlying linguistic system?) and the phenomenon of language mixing or codeswitching (Genesee 2002). Some research in SLA did include work with children, such as the morpheme acquisition studies by Dulay and Burt in the 1970s and 80s (see Goldschneider and DeKeyser 2005). Like the adults in the studies by Schumann and Schmidt, participants included in these studies were learning English in an English-speaking environment, in this case, California. They were therefore probably learning English in both instructed and out-of-school settings. However, the researchers were not looking at differences in explicit/formal and implicit/informal learning, but rather were mapping the progression of the learning structures in the L2, regardless of the participants’ age or mode of learning the target language.

Later researchers, while not framing their work as studying informal learning per se, were seeking to understand the role of the social context, and hence everyday informal language use, in shaping L2 learning. Norton’s (2000) seminal ethnographic study of immigrant women in Canada showed that despite the commonly held notion that English as a second language (ESL) settings are contexts where learners are fully immersed in the L2, many of her participants had only limited occasions for meaningful interactions with ‘native speakers’ of English. One participant who worked at a restaurant related that she was treated by her English-speaking co-workers ‘as a broom’, and denied opportunities to move into positions in the restaurant where she would be able to interact with customers. Because they were marginalised members of society, many of the women’s chances for interaction and negotiation of meaning that foster second language acquisition were quite restricted. This work shows that social structures often constrain the ways that less powerful members of society, immigrant women and minorities in particular, are able to access opportunities for informal L2 learning (Norton 2013).

In the mid 1990s, inspired by the work on language socialization by linguistic anthropologists such as Schieffelin and Ochs (1986), applied sociolinguists started to look at how emergent bilingual children acquired their languages through social interaction. Zentella’s (1997) seminal study of bilingual children in New York City illustrates children’s development of a keen contextual awareness of when and how to use their various languages for different social functions. In the same vein, Willett (1995) employed a language socialization approach to document the English learning of three recently arrived first-grade immigrant girls in the United States. Although she did the study in the girls’ school, her interest was in how they acquired the language through interactions during the school day. She attached an audio recorder to the girls, and recorded their interactions throughout the day. She found that for small children, significant amounts of L2 learning happened as they negotiated their relationships with peers and their place within the group. A similar approach was employed by Day (2002) in her study of Hari, a kindergarten-aged immigrant boy in Canada from
Pakistan. Like other language socialization studies, she used audio recordings and careful observation of peer interactions to follow Hari’s language learning as part of his trajectory to becoming a competent member of the English-speaking group, such as the following interaction between Hari and a classmate (Day 2002, p. 83):

**Casey:** Know what I did, watch, good, I’m almost away from him, and you said, ‘Get him, bud’ and I went like this, and he said ‘Ah psh::: pshhhh::: pshhhh::: rrrr rrr[rr

**Hari:** [Don’t you know, I was (smashing over) to him and the (roller) too and um don’t you know ( . . . [.)

**Casey:** [And pretend you said: Bu:::d look

**Hari:** Rrrrrrrrrrr

**Casey:** [Pretend you said, ‘Hy Hari says: “Bu:d, look out:::.”’

**Hari:** Bu:d, look out (same intonation as Casey)

**Casey:** And I fell in the water.

**Hari:** Don’t you know, rrrr rrrrr rrr[rr

**Casey:** [eeeah pyew

Day (2002, p. 84) explains that ‘the interchange shows how in their play the boys pass the role of conversational initiator and director back and forth’. The data illustrate that Hari is not just learning vocabulary and linguistic structures, but an ability to use his L2 to navigate the norms and conventions of the group, as in his use of the discourse marker ‘Don’t you know’ to take the floor by claiming the right to speak and get others to pay attention to what he is saying. Conversely, Valdes’s (2001) study of adolescent Latina girls in California found that because they were linguistically and socially isolated they missed out on many of the types of interactions that Willett’s and Day’s younger participants had had, and that had provided plentiful informal language learning opportunities within school. These studies emphasise that even within school settings, L2 learners benefit greatly beyond classroom instruction from informal opportunities for social interaction with peers.

With the exception of these studies, mainstream SLA research has rarely examined younger learners’ informal L2 learning. However, as cognitive and psycholinguistic approaches to SLA have been complimented by ‘socio-’ approaches (sociocultural, sociocognitive, sociolinguistic, language socialization), more attention is now being paid to how the learner’s identity and the social context influence learning. Researchers themselves may not explicitly frame their work as ‘research on informal L2 learning’, but they are examining how aspects of L2 learning are shaped by everyday social encounters outside of formal classroom instruction. Wagner (2016) terms research on informal language use ‘L2 learning in the wild’. Using a conversation analytic (CA) approach, he argues that real-world talk is chaotic and unpredictable, and cannot therefore be modelled through neat or linear models (cf. the collaboration efforts of Scandinavian scholars: http://languagelearninginthewild.com/). He concludes that, like Albert, Wes or the women in Norton’s study, and the children in Willett’s, Day’s and Valdes’s studies, L2 learning is as much about becoming a member in a new community as it is about mastery of linguistic forms. In this sense, these scholars approach L2 learning as a form of sociocultural engagement, and hence they prioritise studying informal learning through everyday interactions. Another important similarity Wagner (2016) makes between these early studies on informal L2 learning is that they employ related research methodologies. They are qualitative studies (case studies, ethnography, language socialization and conversation analysis) that use naturalistic data (audio recordings of naturally occurring interactions, field notes of observations and interviews.
with participants), and tend to find evidence for language learning by documenting changes in L2 use by following participants longitudinally, for months or even years.

**Critical issues and topics**

There are several reasons why few researchers have looked at younger L2 learners in informal settings. First, as mentioned previously, SLA research has predominantly focused on instructed contexts or been carried out in controlled or clinical settings. The psycholinguistic tradition of SLA research, upon which the field was built, still approaches questions of L2 learning from a (post)positivist perspective and therefore tends to prefer quantitative, and in particular experimental, research where variables can be accounted for and controlled. For example, a study might look at how a group of learners who share certain characteristics perform on a given L2 task. Evidence of L2 learning can be garnered by comparing the learners’ performance before and after a particular intervention (called ‘pre-post design’) or by comparing them to a similar group of learners who did not receive the intervention (comparing a control and experimental group). The evidence being measured is usually some type of linguistic element or structure, such as grammar, phonology or vocabulary. In informal settings, it is difficult to distinguish in research terms what constitutes actually learning the language versus merely using the language, without being able to show whether any learning – change in the L2 learner’s interlanguage system – has taken place. Gass (1999), studying incidental vocabulary learning, notes a related problem of how a researcher can know whether a particular word was really learned through incidental exposure.

A second issue is the difficulty of collecting data in natural settings. While anthropologists, conversation analysts and sociolinguists have long done fieldwork in communities, workplaces, churches and so forth, applied and educational linguists are less accustomed to working in settings outside of schools. Traditionally, this may have been partially due to the difficulty in collecting data ‘in the wild’. Recording devices were expensive, cumbersome and obtrusive, and written field notes of linguistic data can be construed as less reliable. However, nowadays audio and video recorders are small and readily available, and though transcribing audio recordings is still time consuming it can now be aided by voice recognition programmes, and analysis is greatly facilitated by qualitative analysis software such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti. Mitchell et al. (2013) note that much of the SLA research from a functionalist perspective, in particular Perdue’s (2002) study of adult immigrants in the large-scale European Science Foundation study, documents naturalistic language learning. Likewise, the DYLAN project (Berthoud et al. 2013), a large-scale study of multilingualism across workplaces and government institutions in Europe, is a good example of a conversation analysis approach to studying everyday language use, although it focused exclusively on adults and its purpose was not to document informal language learning.

Another critical issue that has emerged is the changing scope of young children’s informal learning of L2 English. As public primary programmes expand rapidly in many countries, more children are being exposed to English from a younger age (Kaplan et al. 2011). What is not as clear is to what extent and how the nature of English exposure and use for young children across the globe is changing. Consider the diagram of L2 learning contexts in figure 27.1.

Here, instructed English as a foreign language (+classroom/-community) is the opposite of naturalistic language learning (-classroom/+community). Intuitively, this makes sense, but according to the diagram then, there are no opportunities for naturalistic learning in EFL
settings. However, Sayer and Ban (2014) researching young EFL students’ out-of-school use of English in Mexico noted that the children reported using English fairly often in their daily lives. They documented 14 different out-of-school activities that 12–13-year-olds did in English, including listening to pop music, watching movies and TV shows, playing video games, watching videos on YouTube and interacting with family members in the United States through Facebook. They also found that there was a mismatch between what the children’s teachers thought they did with English outside of school, which was very little, and what the children themselves reported. Likewise, Idris’s (2016) study of adolescent English learners in Indonesia found that, although the goal of their EFL program was to allow them to access academic information through English, most of the participants reported not using English for emails or for consulting reference materials, but that they did use it for movies, songs, browsing web pages related to personal interests and sending text messages. Sockett (2014) and Sayer and Ban (2014) suggest that the growing accessibility to and preponderance of English in everyday activities mediated through digital means is breaking down the established distinction between ESL and EFL contexts, and making Figure 27.1 above somewhat obsolete.

**Current contributions and research**

Clearly, both the areas of informal language learning and children’s second language learning are expanding and starting to converge. We focus on three areas related to SLA research and online learning.
Young learners’ informal learning and language acquisition research

Current SLA research continues to expand our understanding of the differences between instructed and informal language learning. There is a general consensus that informal L2 learning has advantages over formal instruction at least in terms of retention or memory. Pavlenko (2015, n.p.) summarises the results to date:

Psycholinguistic findings suggest that the key differences between second language learning in the classroom and ‘in the wild’ lie in the memory systems involved and in the depth and nature of language processing. Memory is a set of dynamic integrated systems, commonly divided into implicit memory that requires little to no conscious awareness and explicit memory that encodes our knowledge about the world and is subject to conscious recall. Foreign language learning in the classroom engages explicit memory, both for memorization of new words and rules and for their conscious recall during classroom activities, quizzes, and tests.

The implicit/unconscious versus explicit/conscious memory systems recalls the earlier discussion of acquisition and learning. However, as with this distinction, this theory is mostly developed based on adult learners, and it is not clear whether the memory-involved L2 acquisition processes are similar or different in younger learners.

Recently, SLA scholars have begun to examine specifically the question of informal learning and younger learners, particularly as it relates to the development of particular L2 skills. The results so far have been mixed. For example, in Europe, Unsworth et al. (2015) concluded that ‘incidental exposure’ to English outside the classroom for four- to five-year-olds did not seem to affect vocabulary or grammar development. At the same time, Lindgren and Muñoz (2013) found that for somewhat older children it had a positive impact on reading and listening. They identified the parents’ education and socioeconomic levels as being related to the amount and type of exposure that children had to English, and pointed especially to movie watching as a main source of input in the home. An early study by Y’dewalle and Van de Poel (1999) of 8–12-year-olds’ incidental L2 learning through watching cartoons had two interesting findings. First, that the children’s level of formal study in the language did not predict the amount of incidental learning and, second, that compared to adults children benefited more from having the L2 in the soundtrack rather than in the subtitles. Likewise Sylvén and Sundqvist’s (2012) study of 11–12-year-old children in Sweden found a positive correlation between their English proficiency level and the hours per week they spent playing online video games.

Narrative and retrospective research

As researchers became more interested in the social aspects of L2 learning, they began considering other types of data. Researchers adopting a sociocultural lens inspired by the theories of Vygotsky were particularly interested in narrative and retrospective accounts of language learning (Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000). Retrospective narratives often entail the participant, now as an adult, autobiographically recalling learning experiences she had as a child. They can be in the form of a written introspective diary or memoir or as a life-history interview (Benson 2004). Swain et al. (2015) used language learners’ narratives from various sources, stories elicited through email, as part of class assignments, and interviews, and theorised them through key concepts of Vygotskian sociocultural theory such as the zone...
of proximal development and activity theory. One woman, Mona, recalled her early experiences with English:

I began learning English at age twelve in junior high school in China. At that time [in 1971], because it was during the Cultural Revolution [1966–76], we didn’t learn much English actually. After high school [. . .] I settled down in the countryside and worked on a farm, and the village school needed an English teacher and I happened to know ABC. So that is how I became an English teacher, even though I didn’t know much English! I listened radio broadcasts designed to teach the English language. The opportunities to learn English were so limited.

(Mona’s story exemplified the concept of mediation, the way that learning happens in conjunction with the use of other material, cultural or symbolic means. This concept of mediation is more fully discussed by Lantolf et al. (2015). Based on Vygotsky’s theory of higher mental functioning, mediation is the process through which humans use higher-level symbolic artefacts – language being the most important – to socially control the biological aspects of learning.

There is a growing body of narrative studies of L2 learning which include retrospective accounts of how participants learned languages informally when they were younger (cf. the edited volume by Ogulnick 2000); a review of the literature reveals researchers have not framed them as studies of younger learner per se. Nevertheless, there seems to be a strong potential for using retrospective narrative studies to understand the experiences of younger learners. Barkhuizen et al. (2014) provide an excellent overview of carrying out narrative research including methods for analysing these data.

Technology, online affinity spaces and informal L2 learning

Clearly, digital platforms provide multiple ways for English learners to learn informally by engaging in activities they enjoy through English. Newgarden and Zheng (2016) discuss the many ways that the massive multiplayer online game (MMOG) *World of Warcraft* provides affordances for L2 English users to acquire the language. Bytheway (2015) provides a taxonomy of 15 vocabulary learning strategies of L2 MMOG players from noticing the frequency of words to recognizing knowledge gaps. Two other studies, in Japan (Butler et al. 2014) and Sweden (Sundqvist and Sylvén 2014), also point to the positive connection between children’s videogame playing and English learning. They document several advantages for younger learners who engage in activities involving ‘extramural English’, including increased levels of confidence in using English and the development of strategies for negotiating meaning and conversation repair, and discuss the implications for designing pedagogical activities based on gaming features (see ‘recommendations for practice’ below). Sayer and Ban (2014) document the multiple ways that children in Mexico engage with English, including through music and social media. In their study, 12-year-olds describe how they are adept at combining various resources to figure out what something they encounter in English in a song or video means. Most of the children did not think of this as learning or even practising English, as this extract reveals:

_Damien:_ I have this video game it’s like a little cube and all the instructions are in English [. . .] It’s called Super Mario Sunshine.
Interviewer: So to beat the level you have to figure out what they’re saying in English . . . ?
Teresa: They talk . . . and I have to open two tabs [windows on the computer]. One is the Google translator, and so I write it [what they say in the video game], and I see what it means. And then I go back to the game and back and forth like that until I get it.

(Sayer and Ban 2014, p. 324)

Others explained how they used YouTube tutorials to get through levels in a video game. Google Translator was also used to understand song lyrics: the lyrics could in turn be referenced in comments posted on friends’ Facebook walls.

Researchers studying children’s informal use of English are increasingly going where their participants are: online. One of the most promising recent areas of research in informal language learning is the work on how young L2 learners engage in online affinity spaces (Gee 2004). An affinity space is characterised by Gee as an online space organised around the endeavour or interest around which the space is organised. An early important study was Lam’s (2000) examination of Almon, a Chinese high school student whose family had immigrated to the USA. In school, Almon struggled with English and was placed in remedial classes. He was acutely aware that this cast him as a low-achieving, ineffective English user, and would have consequences for his career beyond school. However, Almon was an effective user of English amongst an online community of J-pop (Japanese pop music) fans. In this virtual setting, he was able to participate as an equal member and gained significant confidence and language skills, since the online spaces provided a safer context for self-expression and feedback, where he was familiar with the communicative norms of the community and could position himself as a content expert.

In a later study, Lam (2004) found that bilingual chat rooms provided a powerful forum for young second language learners to explore and validate their identities, by using code-switching to talk to peers about issues of relevance to them. Black (2009) documented how adolescents with diverse backgrounds – both so-called ‘native speakers’ and L2 learners of English – come together in online fan-fiction communities. These are sites organised around a common interest, such as Harry Potter, where members write their own stories within the same world, and read and comment on each other’s stories. Black (2009) found that within these communities, participation was evaluated less on language skills per se, and more on a writer’s creativity, originality of ideas and knowledge of the milieu. Li (2012) traces the progress of a fourth-grade Chinese English language learner who, as she discovers her passion for manga stories, transforms from a struggling ESL student to an avid reader, illustrator and writer. Thorne et al. (2009, p. 807) maintain that ‘the support feedback and positive language experiences that ELL [English language learners] youth gain through voluntary literacy activities can provide a ‘counterbalance’ (Yi 2007, p. 35) for the frustrations they experience when using English in the classrooms’. They explain that these spaces are often ‘hybridised’, meaning that users take existing cultural and linguistic elements and combine them into new communicative practices. Traditional written and spoken forms are combined with emojis, memes and short embedded video clips to create new multimodal communications.

Recommendations for practice

The studies reviewed here speak to the richness and potential of informal, out-of-school L2 learning for younger learners. However, does research in this area hold any promise for
language educators? Can informal learning be brought into the classroom? Out-of-school language learning is difficult to bottle and bring into the classroom. Eskildsen and Theodórsdóttir (2015, p. 18) observe that the challenge facing L2 users, and therefore researchers as well, is that ‘what L2 users need to learn [is] the ability to navigate competently in locally contextualised settings, socially and linguistically’ and that these ‘in the wild’ social interactions are very difficult to replicate in the classroom.

Many of the activities children do when they are informally learning English, especially watching movies, cartoons and playing video games, would not be appropriate in most classroom settings. They may be highly motivating, but they are also time-consuming. At home, learning two or three new words randomly or incidentally while playing games or watching television for three hours may be acceptable, but not at school. School learning is packaged to be efficient and designed to meet certain objectives which can be measured in terms of outcomes. For the same reasons informal learning is difficult to research, it is also difficult to assess since the outcomes are often less tangible. For these reasons, informal learning belies direct translation into classroom practice. One notable exception is a study by Reinders and Wattana (2014), who modified the game Ragnarok Online for EFL students in Thailand to consist of six 90-minute lessons. The game’s missions were designed to include special instructions and quests requiring students to use English. They measured the students’ willingness to communicate (WTC) and found students felt less anxious and more confident in their ability to use English while playing the game.

In reviewing the research on young learners’ L2 use in non-school settings, we can see that there are at least five characteristics which tend to make it more successful.

1. It is ‘student-centred’ in the sense that the learner is completely autonomous and has maximum control over the selection of content and pace.
2. Learning English is often secondary to doing some kind of social activity.
3. The learner willingly chooses to engage in social activity because it is of interest to her.
4. The social activity is usually ‘authentic’ in the sense that the linguistic content was not prepared with an L2 learner in mind.
5. The learners develop strategies while doing the activity which serve to scaffold their L2 use, such as the use of tutorials, lyrics or translators.

Note that these characteristics have been recognised, in different ways and at different times, as principles of good second or foreign language teaching. Brown (2015), for example, includes meaningful learning, intrinsic motivation and autonomy as key principles of communicative language teaching. Task-based (Beglar and Hunt 2002), project-based (Stoller 2002) and content-language integrated learning (CLIL) approaches aim to engage learners with some kind of activity through which L2 learning will happen.

Again, technology may be the area where the lines between formal and informal L2 learning are being blurred. Whereas independent but semi-guided learning used to take place in self-access centres and language labs equipped with VCRs and audio cassette players, they are being replaced by iPad and smartphone apps. In many ways, the apps are better suited for younger children than traditional language labs. Duolingo (www.duolingo.com) is an example that is well designed; besides having an excellent layout, interface and graphics, the app tracks the learner’s progress and rewards the user with prizes as one ‘levels up’. It is designed to be used as a stand-alone language learning program, or as a tool for teachers to supplement classroom instruction. Interestingly, the 20+ language courses include minority and heritage languages such as Welsh and Irish, the ‘universal’ language Esperanto, and an
‘incubator’ function for user-based content to be contributed to build new courses. One of the main features that seems to make the Duolingo programmes successful, and one which it shares with many informal L2 activities, is that it incorporates game and play dynamics, referred to as gamification (Kapp 2012). Reinhardt and Sykes (2012) argue that the use of technology to include gaming dynamics in language learning in educational settings is a huge potential area for future work. Butler et al. (2014) argue that good design features of video games can inform pedagogical principles, and list nine features: fantasy (or reality), rules and goals, sensory stimuli, optimal level of challenge/difficulty, mystery/curiosity, control and choice, assessment, speed and action and multiple players.

**Future directions**

Moving forward, research on young learners’ L2 learning outside the classroom calls on scholars to connect areas of SLA work that have traditionally been disconnected. We suggested that this includes bridging research on SLA and bilingualism (Ortega 2013), research on adult and younger L2 learners, research on learning in instructed classroom settings and informal, naturalistic settings and work on digital and real-world social environments.

Clearly, technology in its various forms will continue to permeate young children’s lives and play an ever bigger role in informal language learning (Thorne and Black 2007). Social media and social networks like Facebook and Snapchat incorporate multimodal forms of communication which provide opportunities for young English learners to do many of the things that have been shown to promote L2 acquisition: authentic interactions with negotiation for meaning, taking risks with language, integrating practice of various skills and so forth. As Lam (2004) shows, chat rooms and affinity sites can provide ‘safe’ spaces for learners to explore their L2 identities. When incorporating social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook into the classroom-based language learning, Lantz-Andersson et al. (2013, p. 293), in a study of children aged 13–16 from four different countries, argue that it must be ‘deliberately, collaboratively and dynamically negotiated by educators and students to form a new language-learning space with its own potentials and constraints’.

Another promising area that has received almost no attention in the research on younger learners is the role that siblings play in supporting L2 learning. Kibler, Palacios, and Simpson Baird (2016) report that pre-school aged children in Spanish-speaking families in the USA who had older siblings were more likely to use English and acquired the language more quickly than children without older siblings. Amongst immigrant families, sibling interaction aids English learning, but at the same time it may lead to language shift away from the family’s language. Orellana (2009) describes how children in immigrant families act as ‘language brokers’, and are often called upon to mediate adult situations, like disagreements with landlords, and use their languages in ways that most children do not. In English foreign language settings, it stands to reason that siblings and peers will promote informal language learning through shared interests in social activities in English such as video gaming, music and cartoons, although currently there is no research that supports our understanding of how these activities support L2 learning.

Finally, as Benson and Reinders (2011, p. 2) in the introduction to the volume *Beyond the language classroom* note:

> It is common knowledge among teachers that the progress made by students who learn languages only in the classroom tends to be limited, especially in their ability to use the language for spoken or written communication as contrasted with receptive skills.
Well-rounded communicative proficiency, it seems, depends to a large extent on the learner’s efforts to use and learn the language beyond the walls of the classroom. For this reason alone, settings for language learning beyond the classroom deserve much more attention in research than they have received hitherto.

Therefore, not only should researchers better understand what types of informal L2 practices younger learners engage in and how these affect their acquisition, but the research to date also suggests that there are some important potential implications for developing pedagogical approaches that connect in-school and out-of-school learning.

**Further reading**

   
   An edited volume, mostly focused on L2 English, that addresses various aspects of learning in out-of-school contexts. It includes several chapters on adolescent learners.

   
   Gee approaches the topic of language in learning through a critical literacy lens. While it does not focus on L2 learning, it does illuminate the differences many young people find between how they use language to learn in their daily lives, including gaming and affinity spaces and how language is treated and taught in school.

   
   The book addresses how younger learners navigate online spaces through English. He specifically casts this as ‘online informal learning of English’ (OILE), discusses its processes through various types of online activities and also considers pedagogical implications.

   
   The article looks at L2 learning in two Web 2.0 environments through a language socialization lens, examining how adolescent learners acquire English through participation in fan-fiction and gaming sites.

**Related topics**

Gaming, motivation, materials, contexts of learning, multilingualism

**Notes**


2. Although Norton’s participants referred to native speakers of English, the term ‘native speaker’ here is in quotes to recognise that it is a problematic concept (Faez 2011). Indeed, part of Norton’s critique of SLA is that the field has addressed relations of power and negotiations of identity as ‘non-native’ speakers try to gain recognition with ‘native speakers’ as legitimate speakers of English.

**References**


