

Beyond learner autonomy: a dynamic systems view of the informal learning of English in virtual online communities

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Abstract

This article discusses the informal learning of English by non-native speakers with particular reference to the role of virtual communities. The concept of informal learning is presented and related to current areas of interest in the literature such as incidental learning, and dynamic systems theory. Our research investigates how non-specialist language learners use the Internet in their spare time to read and listen to English, and also communicate in English, notably in online communities through social networking websites. The study looks particularly at the dynamics of these phenomena by studying a small number of non-native users of English over a period of two months. The results of this research will be used to question the relevance of the learner autonomy paradigm, which has been a cornerstone of language learning policy in Europe for the past thirty years.

Keywords: informal learning of English, dynamic systems theory, learner autonomy, online resources, longitudinal approaches, incidental language acquisition

1 Introduction

It has become apparent in recent years that high speed Internet access and Web 2.0 tools such as social networking websites allow non-native speakers in France to be exposed to English in informal settings, often as part of a virtual community of English users. This article seeks to situate the informal learning which may occur in these settings with regard to the literature in areas such as learner autonomy, incidental learning, and dynamic systems theory. The research which will be presented is an activity-log study in which a group of five students from a French university recorded details of all on-line activities in English over a period of two months. This is a follow-up to a quantitative questionnaire study involving 225 students in 2009 to establish the types of informal learning which students engage in (Toffoli & Sockett, 2010; Sockett, 2011). The qualitative data from this small number of non-native users will be analysed in order to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of these phenomena. The discussion of these results will suggest how the learning of English in France today may best be described and also how it may be promoted

through appropriate classroom contents. Finally the limits of the study and future perspectives will be suggested.

The specific focus of this research is that it attempts to explore the use of social learning technologies, which are often studied in formal learning contexts, from the point of view of informal and incidental phenomena which function as part of a complex dynamic system. In the past, the learner autonomy model was used to analyse the extent to which the learner takes charge of his or her own formal language learning, suggesting a number of parameters of learner autonomy such as “decision to learn”, “choice of method” and “means of internal evaluation” (Holec, 1981). While this perspective was one of the first to be truly learner-centered, it did not yet consider the learner as a language user and social actor, as more recent task-based views of language learning do. The focus on study in language learning centres at the heart of the learner autonomy model corresponded to the technological reality of the 1980s and 1990s when some types of authentic documents were not freely available to the individual language learner as they are today via the Internet, and foreign language use often required international travel. The extent to which this model may now be out of step with the experience of many learners will be one of the issues examined in this study.

A second and more recent approach is that which seeks to exploit the potential of social networking activities within classroom settings (Lomiccka & Lord, 2009; Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008). This is a more pedagogy-based approach, seeking to describe the acquisitional differences between classroom learning with no technology, low technology or technology mediating communication between class members. The classroom-centeredness of such approaches implies that the potential for learning outside teacher-controlled or teacher-orchestrated environments is either invalid or simply too difficult to analyse in any detail.

A very different approach is that concerning the areas of informal and incidental learning. In the field of Education Sciences, informal learning is defined by Jay Cross (2006:19) as “that which enables you to participate successfully in life, at work, and in the groups that matter to you. Informal learning is the unofficial, unscheduled, impromptu way people learn to do their jobs.” Whereas Cross views such learning as intentional, other researchers such as Tissot (2004) and Stevens (2010) suggest that the learner may not even be aware that learning is taking place. Thus the recent *Study on the Impact of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and New Media on Language Learning* (Stevens, 2010), defines informal language learning as:

Learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or ‘incidental’/ random) (*op. cit.*: 12).

The degree of intentionality in informal learning is also a key issue in the field of incidental learning (Ellis, 1994; Rieder, 2003), which plays an important role in vocabulary acquisition. Rieder (2003:26) reminds us that there are many similarities between the psychological construct of implicit learning and the pedagogical concept of incidental acquisition, and concludes that “implicit learning does involve attention to the stimulus but does not involve conscious operations” (*op. cit.*: 28).

The impromptu nature of informal learning is also an indication that it is emergent in nature, taking place in a complex dynamic system in which interactions between the many components in the system lead to the emergence of collective outcomes which might not have been easy to predict from an analysis of the individual components. Indeed, as Ellis (2007) suggests, these outcomes depend as much on the character of the interactions between components as they do on the character of the components themselves.

Among the characteristics of dynamic systems presented by Van Geert (2008), four seem to be particularly relevant to the study of informal language learning. Firstly, the assertion that initial conditions are crucial to learning outcomes is particularly pertinent in that these conditions are no longer uniform, with each learner possessing their own set of references to the target language gathered through an eclectic process of informal contact. Hence there is a great deal of individualisation in the learning process. Secondly, the study of attractor and repeller states in a system can be helpful in observing how certain learning strategies (such as reference to subtitles) can be an initial help to the informal learner before later becoming a hindrance. Thirdly, the possibility of co-adaptation of elements in the system may give rise to unexpected learning behaviours emerging from interactions between the large number of tools and contexts available to the learner. Finally, the non-linear nature of complex dynamic systems should lead to the appearance of examples of phase transition, such as jumps in degrees of fluency or comprehension unrelated to any increase in the quantity of exposure to the target language.

In our own research, an initial study relating to informal language learning was carried out in 2009. 225 students at the University of Strasbourg were surveyed regarding their contact with English online in their free time. (Sockett, 2011; Toffoli & Sockett, 2010). While two of the sample reported having no contact with English in their free time at all, sixty percent of the respondents mentioned regularly downloading or streaming films and television series in English while some thirty percent also corresponded regularly with other English users on the social networking website *Facebook* (other social networking tools such as *Twitter* and *Myspace* were used by only a handful of respondents). Other activities involving English included visiting English language websites, listening to music with English lyrics online and sending e-mails to friends. The importance of this study was to confirm the widespread nature of these practices amongst users of English in France.

The aforementioned studies from a number of different fields leave unanswered several questions regarding informal language learning. In particular, little is known about the amounts of time spent on these activities, their stability over a long period, and how the different activities interact together to produce unexpected outcomes as envisaged by Van Geert (2008) and others. In order to answer some of these questions, the research design of the current study seeks in particular to question the pertinence of the learner autonomy model for non-specialist learners of English today.

The research hypothesis of this study is that the learner autonomy model is no longer pertinent to the learning of English in France today, since language use and implicit learning are already taking place through everyday communicative activities in virtual communities.

The study sought to validate this hypothesis by answering three main questions. Do stable contacts with English persist over a long period, allowing these students to be correctly described as English users (and not just “learners”)? Can these English

users be seen to be functioning in virtual communities? And what interactions between components in their complex personal learning environments emerge from this language use?

The first of these questions seeks to establish whether the quantitative data obtained from our preliminary study corresponds to long-term involvement in activities or whether contacts with target language users and resources are merely fleeting experiments. The purpose of the second question is to determine what relationships are involved in this informal learning. The third question seeks to investigate how learning takes place in the complex dynamic system of informal contacts with the target language.

2 Methods

The 2009 study provides a good basic understanding of these phenomena among students in France, but gives few details about the precise times and contents involved, and how this behaviour changes over time. It was therefore decided to design an eight-week diary study in which five students from the first sample would report on each occurrence of online English use in their spare time, indicating the websites and times involved and recording any insights into their use of the language. The format of the diary consisted of five columns in which learners could record the address or description of the resource used, the language skill involved, the time the activity took place, the length of the activity and any comments about the English encountered in the activity.

At the end of the eight-week period, the students were also interviewed to clarify some entries in the completed diaries. Four female and one male student participated in the study. All were under 25 years of age. Although they were studying English as a requirement in which they attend 48 hours of formal English classes per year (two hours per week over 24 weeks), in a blended learning format at the Centre de Ressources et d'Apprentissage des Langues (CRAL) at the University of Strasbourg, none of the students involved in the study were majoring in English. All were tested as having English levels of B1 or B2. The choice of methodology for this work was influenced by Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) who suggest that qualitative longitudinal studies of a few learners are more likely to yield insights into the dynamics of these complex systems. Hence the aim of this research is not to provide a snapshot of where a large number of language users are in their language learning process, but to take a long-term view of their movement towards the goal of full participation in language communities. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) further suggest that it is important to consider timescales in order to distinguish between activities which may last only a few seconds and those which learners may engage in for several hours a day. They also encourage consideration of the system as a whole rather than reducing research to a study of a single parameter in order to better see how different parts of the system and context adapt to each other. Cross-examining the data here in light of the quantitative 2009 study thus serves to improve the robustness of the research.

3 Analysis and results

The learner activities observed in this research can be considered in two parts, those which were broadly in line with the first study, and those which provided further

Table 1 Example of one user's online activities in English over eight weeks

Time spent using English resources on line	37 hours
Number of different events	34
Time periods involved	Evenings and weekends
Written interaction	Used <i>Facebook</i> 16 times to interact with friends met on holiday
Video	Watched TV series 8 times in sessions of 45 to 120 minutes
Listening	Used <i>Deezer</i> and <i>lacoccinelle.net</i> 3 times
Reading	Used work related resources 6 times
Learning	Reported incidental vocabulary acquisition and reading song lyrics for meaning while listening to music on demand

insights into the research hypotheses mentioned earlier. As in our quantitative study, students reported downloading or streaming popular English and American television series such as *Desperate Housewives*, *One Tree Hill*, *The IT Crowd* or *Dexter*, as well as recent films. These media were often available with informally contributed French language subtitles. The respondents also reported using social networks to keep in touch with other English users known personally to them, whom they had met in a variety of settings including holidays and study abroad. One student reported corresponding regularly with an English speaker she had met on *Facebook* because they had the same first and last names. Respondents hardly ever spoke English online, only occasionally using a VOIP service to talk to friends, but often used text chat services, including the synchronous text chat function of *Facebook*.

Results which were not provided by the 2009 study included specific data about amounts of time spent on different events, the frequency of various activities and the manner in which these activities evolved over time. Table 1 gives a summary of the different types of activities engaged in by one student, AH, as an example. Her 37 hours of English over the eight weeks she was involved in the study is the median for the group, although one student reported in excess of 400 hours of online activity in English during the same period.

3.1 The learner as language user

The data collected in the student logs provided insights into the specific web-surfing practices in English of these students. We found that these involved frequent use of the same websites, sometimes those relating to their major field of study. For example, a student of Graphic Design consulted on-line tutorials for the use of *Photoshop*TM or for information on computer graphics. A student of Japanese reported regularly using English language websites where he watched interviews with Japanese celebrities, read articles about mangas or about Japanese literature, played a Japanese video game and consulted a news and discussion site about Japan (*japantoday.com*) frequently. This latter activity was somewhat sporadic at the beginning of the period, becoming a daily ten-to-fifteen-minute experience over the last three weeks. Only one other student regularly consulted a news site (*bbc.co.uk*), although in her case it was more of a weekly event, engaged in for time periods of anywhere from ten minutes to an hour. One student

used transportation and tourism sites to plan her holiday. Two students used online dictionaries and translation sites to make their own translations of various documents (often related to content they had found online).

The student who participated in chats with English speakers on *Facebook* did so two to three times a week, for periods of time varying between twenty minutes and two hours per session. A second student chatted on a daily basis with Norwegian, Danish and friends of other nationalities, for periods of between half an hour and two hours at a time. The chat sessions were occasionally undertaken concurrently with other on-line activities such as listening to music on demand services. Indeed, three of the five students concerned reported using on-demand music services such as *Deezer* or *Spotify* rather than streaming from the website of a radio station.

The only activities that involved all five users were social networking and watching video content (television series and films), generally streamed or downloaded from a limited number of websites such as *megadownload.com* or *alloshowtv.com*. One participant watched a minimum of two and a half hours of series per day, building up to several sessions of up to five hours by the end of the observation period.

In contrast to these non-language-learning oriented uses of English language sites, one student did use English learning sites (*freelanguage.org*, *focusenglish.com*, *englishbanana.com*) quite extensively and also considered her use of material related to her English course on the university LMS to be part of her informal use of English during the first two weeks of the study, but both of these activities were abandoned during the last four weeks in favour of other, less learning-oriented occupations. The types of on-line activities these five students regularly engaged in (researching areas of interest, getting information from news sites, chatting with friends and acquaintances, listening to music and watching series) would seem to clearly indicate the “user” status of these individuals regarding English. The frequency and duration of the activities would also appear to testify to their durable nature, as activities that have become part of the long-term habits of the users.

3.2 Participation in virtual communities

Several elements in the data would tend to support the view that the study participants are “real” users and active participants in various types of virtual communities, including social networks, private closed groups of friends, *ad hoc* learning groups and communities of fans, users and viewers of various sorts.

As previously stated, all five participants in this study exchange with friends on social networks, primarily *Facebook*, though one indicates trying out *Twitter* and another using *MySpace*. Exchanges are both synchronous and asynchronous since the chat tools in *Facebook* and *MSN* are used by some learners for live discussions with friends. One learner records chatting with teachers on an English language learning site and finding this to be “a good exercise, as I had to respond rather quickly (no time to look words up in the dictionary)” (LJ). Another person (HL) records using *Skype* to communicate with friends in Australia. (BD) describes e-mail exchanges as “specific to certain themes (in my case music)” which provides a sense of belonging to a particular group.

Learners can therefore be seen as participants in virtual communities through forums, chats, social networks, as well as “legitimate peripheral participants” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in communities of users discussing themes such as music, television series and holidays.

3.3 *Language development in the complex dynamic system of informal learning*

The log entries have provided some specific insight into the way the respondents practise the various English language activities they indulge in, particularly as regards listening to music online, practising extensive listening to dialogue, written interaction and vocabulary acquisition. Some indications of the manner in which they process the input, so as to produce new language uptake can be found in the data. While respondents often left blank the column in the diary reserved for comments on the language, a broad range of insights into the informal learning process was recorded, examples of which are presented in the analyses below.

3.3.1 Listening. Concerning the three students who documented using on-demand music services, their first reported action is trying to understand what the song is about, for example: “I like to try to understand the words of certain songs (at least the subject) without looking at (reading) the words” (LJ). These students also mentioned examples of concurrent use of lyrics websites such as *lacoccinelle.net*. Having chosen a song they like, and tried listening for gist, they then listen again while reading the lyrics, to clarify any difficulties of comprehension. This focus on meaning and reliance on written lyrics makes the content accessible even to French learners with relatively elementary levels of English, due to the repetitive nature and familiar themes of popular music. Listening to music is seen as leading to improvement in their general level of listening comprehension. LM, for instance, states: “listen[ing] to English songs can help us to get used to the pronunciation,” yet, nevertheless, four weeks further into the study, comments: “It’s still hard to really understand the meaning of some songs.”

As stated above, the only regular and extensive on-line activity in English in which all five study participants were involved, was watching television series. Among reasons stated for choosing to watch these series in English rather than French, respondents mention the fact that most programmes are available in English several months before their dubbed versions appear in French. They also report a “crossing the Rubicon” experience in which it becomes difficult to watch dubbed material after being exposed to the real voices of the actors in television series, which viewers see as more authentic. Unsurprisingly, it is watching series and films which students consider as most helpful in making progress in listening, considering it a good means to “train your ear” (BD), to hear “ordinary language – the way people speak” (AH), or “for pronunciation” (LJ). LM’s experience gives insight into the degree of progress that a learner might perceive. While she initially claims “I can understand a talk show easier than a sitcom conversation,” only three weeks into the study, she comments: “It seems that now I understand more and more easily what the characters are saying” (in *How I Met Your Mother*). Two weeks later again and regarding a different series, she notes: “I can practically understand the whole conversation.”

3.3.2 *Reading/ written interaction.* The data collected about reading and writing skills tends to first underline the diversity and affordances of on-line resources, as the following examples illustrate: “I think that watching movies, series, ... in a different language [the event documented was a Korean series] with English subtitles is the best way to learn English” (LM); “thanks to the forum [a fan site for the Japanese pop group “Girls’ Generation”], I can interact with people from everywhere of the globe and learn more English words or sentences” (LM); “reading and writing e-mail is good for finding vocabulary” (BD); “on sites like *Japan Today*, ... being a sort of online journal, the language is rather ‘neutral’, which is good for being able to express yourself correctly” (BD); “I use *Facebook* to connect with lots of friends from other countries” (LM); “an article about graphic design taught me quite a lot of vocabulary” (LJ).

A second area of interest in the data on written English, participants’ perception of their language development, is provided only by LM who notices changes in both comprehension and expression: “I notice that now I can read basic English without translating word by word, it feels like reading French,” she comments during the first week of observation. A few days later, referring to a site that comments on the Korean entertainment industry, she observes: “Because of those site, I can read English like I read French, it seems like I understand immediately English.” In week 3 she “notice[s] that my *Facebook* is full of English words, because I’m now use to English it seemed normal to me to be around English words but one of my friend pointed it out to me,” and by the middle of week 4 she notes: “I can make sentences faster in my head” (in a chatroom with several participants).

These are of course the comments of just three learners, but they would tend to support both the notion that online tools favour reading, writing and interaction skills in English, often involving participants in virtual communities, and the learner perception that such practice leads to improved performance in the language.

3.3.3 *Vocabulary.* Vocabulary building appears to be a primary area of acquisition, as seen above regarding reading and listening, and this was further confirmed by several comments such as: “I also learnt specific expressions and vocabulary” (BD) or, “I learned lots of new words and expressions like ‘it’s a shame’” (JL). Only one participant (BD) mentions syntax, stating: “having watched the series over and over again, I pay more attention to the dialogues and so I can learn and revise sentence structures.”

The students’ impressions of learning vocabulary seem to be corroborated by the fact that they were all able to produce at least three words or expressions they claim to have learned during their informal online activities. Examples included terms such as “sweet”, “awesome”, “what’s up”, “wait a minute”, “hope that you are well” and “see you soon”, which are all drawn from, or destined for conversational use.

Perhaps most importantly, when asked if they perceived progress in the “four skills” in English since they had begun doing online activities in the language, all participants said “yes” concerning the understanding of spoken English, four said “yes” with regards to understanding written English, three felt they had made progress in writing in English and two explicitly said they felt they had made no progress in speaking in English. Learning in informal contexts can therefore be seen, at least from the small

sample of learners involved in this study, in the interactions between the affordances of the various media and the social and personal particularities of each learner.

4 Discussion

The significance of these results can be seen in four major areas: the importance of social networking, changes in the way television programmes are viewed, the influence of on-demand music sites on listening strategies and the extent to which learning is taking place in all these activities. These are the areas that tend to provide answers to our research questions regarding online learners of English as users, functioning in virtual communities where novel learning is emerging from their complex personal learning environments.

4.1 Virtual communities

When learners participate in virtual communities with other English users, opportunities arise to use the language in real contexts, such as those relating to work or leisure. Such opportunities are rarely afforded by pedagogies which merely seek to persuade the learner to interact in English with other same primary language classmates. It is also important to point out that the expert-novice ratio is favourable in virtual communities such as interest groups discussing hobbies or work-related interests in English in forum and chat settings.

The importance of social networks as a means of written interaction was also underlined in this study. The multiple roles afforded by the *Facebook* interface, of author, respondent, commenter, recommender, approver etc., give fledgling English users many easy ways to enter into communication in a contextually supportive setting. The multiple functions of the interface, mean that it is a good place to carry out cognitive tasks in the target language such as attributing a status to information, ranking in order of importance and making a verbal response to images, and as such may promote language acquisition (Sockett, 2011).

Finally, the large number of users of *Facebook* is an indication that communication with people known to the learner is likely to be considered more relevant to their real lives than discussions with other people not personally known to the learner or whose true identities are disguised by avatars and pseudonyms. The latter type of discussion may take place in virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, which has not seen the massive uptake envisaged a few years ago, or on thematic forums where pseudonyms are used.

Although watching downloaded or streamed media in the original version involves little or no two-way interaction with other users of English (our research suggests that viewing habits are rarely the conscious subject of social network interactions, for example), such activities do bring learners into prolonged contact with a shared language and sets of values and references which often characterize belonging to a community and as such may facilitate context-appropriate interaction.

4.2 Implications of online video viewing habits

Much recent research into the differences in language skills between teenagers in countries where television series are subtitled (such as Holland or Sweden) and those

in countries where the material is dubbed (such as France or Germany) has underlined the effect of this phenomenon on listening comprehension scores (Rupérez-Micola, Bris & Banal-Estañol, 2009), those in the “dubbing” countries having worse scores than those in the “subtitling” ones. As mentioned above, once having become used to the voices of the original actors, students often find dubbed versions distracting. This could also perhaps be linked to the fact that screen size and definition of both televisions and computers continue to increase, making lip synchronisation problems in dubbed material ever more visible. Our research seems to point to a reduction in the importance of dubbing as a hindrance to listening comprehension for some language learners in France, as they increasingly view series online in English. The fact that these learners now spend significant amounts of time watching English language media also means that they come to the classroom with knowledge of aspects of English and American culture which may be far from the preoccupations of classroom teachers. For example, the 2009 programme for the French *agrégation* secondary school teaching qualification featured Samuel Beckett, Nabokov, William Wilberforce and Shakespeare, whereas learners involved in this study tended to be better acquainted with series such as *Dexter*, *Kyle XY* and *How I Met Your Mother*.

4.3 On-demand music and listening strategies

The appearance of data on music-on-demand services was an unexpected discovery of the study. Use of the *Deezer* service is widespread in France and our research indicates that the affordances of such systems, particularly the ability to choose, play and pause songs leads to a more active approach to listening in some cases. The behaviour described by our respondents, such as synchronous use of websites containing the lyrics of songs they are listening to on *Deezer* would of course be difficult were they listening to live radio feeds which are more difficult to pause and do not always provide advance play lists to allow listeners to look up the lyrics of a song which may particularly interest them. The current widespread use of various types of portable MP3 player is a further indication that choosing music rather than listening to whatever happens to be playing is a current tendency. As such it should not be entirely surprising to detect a more active approach to listening. French learners of English have long been exposed to English language music on the radio, but the low level of listening comprehension observed in French teenagers in European commission research (Rupérez Micola, Bris, Banal-Estañol 2009) for example, has long been considered proof that this exposure does not lead to learners processing the songs for meaning. Our research suggests that this tendency may also be changing. The observation of synchronous use of music on demand and lyrics websites, by which some learners have in a way created a function in their personal learning environments facilitating learning from song lyrics, may indeed be an example of the co-adaptation of system and context suggested by Van Geert (2008) as a property of the dynamics of a complex system.

4.4 Impact on language learning

The language learning observable from this research seems mostly to relate to vocabulary acquisition; indeed, most of the entries in the language column of the

diaries mentioned new words and expressions learned. Like other English users, the learners in this study acquire vocabulary incidentally in the course of activities which do not have such learning as a specific aim. While noticing is taking place (Skehan, 1998), acquisition in this context relies on high frequency, high context exposure to salient examples. This view of language learning as the acquisition of chunks or bundles of language fits in well with connectionist views of learning favoured by researchers in the field of complex systems today (Ellis (2007), for example).

The learner comments also demonstrate metacognitive awareness of degree of comprehension, ranking shows and types of show by comprehension difficulty. The comment “Having watched the series over and over again, I pay more attention to the dialogues” (BD) is reminiscent of Skehan’s (1998) observation that form is attended to only when meaning has become transparent. The relatively repetitive structures of the situation comedy and drama series make favourable settings for learners to become familiar with meaning. Other student comments indicate an impression of increased speed of execution in reading and writing tasks, which may indicate that phase transitions are taking place in the basic operations of the language. Finally the observations that “you learn the way people talk” and “it’s more informal,” may be seen as an indication that some learners are aware of the gulf which we have argued now exists between their experience of English speaking cultures and the themes more familiar to their teachers, who are mostly products of French universities where a more Shakespeare-centred syllabus still holds sway.

5 Conclusions

The three questions addressed in this study can each be answered positively in light of the results presented here. Informal language use involves consistent and long-term contacts with resources in the target language, positioning these students as authentic English users and not only as students of the language. Moreover, these users have established stable contacts with other English language users, allowing them to become functioning participants in virtual communities. Such communities of English users interact together either as an extension of an existing friendship, or because of shared interests, and shared exposure to media can also be seen as providing many of the characteristics of a virtual community. Finally, examples can be seen of how components in this complex system interact together to provide novel outcomes such as the synchronous use of lyrics websites and on-demand music services, or the reading of English subtitles on other-language videos.

Pedagogical applications of this research should involve consideration of how best to take account of these informal learning practices in formal instruction. The European Commission report into the influence of ICT on language learning encourages researchers to consider the following areas:

- social communication as a regular, systemic component in formal or non-formal language learning and teaching practices;
- social networks as integrated, occasional or one-off additions to complement formal or non-formal language learning and teaching practices;

- the development of alternative, blended approaches to formal and non-formal learning and teaching practices (Stevens, 2010: 53).

Suggestions that social networking should be brought into the classroom as a learning activity (Lomicka & Lord, 2009) seem however to run the risk of presenting the private face of the learner in a public setting and as such might lead to problems such as loss of face, unwillingness to participate, or the creation of online dialogues with other learners purely for the benefit of the teacher. Acknowledging that learning is more likely to take place in virtual communities outside the classroom where available time, existing virtual communities and intrinsic motivation are already in place may be a more realistic approach to exploiting the affordances of such tools. Many of the skills required to participate in exchanges on *Facebook* (deciding which comments to respond to, referring to other participants, etc.) may also be practised in contexts such as thematic forums, where identities are less obvious and where the subject matter may be of a less personal nature. It is therefore possible that forums would constitute a better classroom activity than social networks, while still helping learners to develop relevant communication skills.

We have sought to demonstrate that the practices of English users today, as outlined in this and other studies, as well as our current understanding of action-oriented learning, associative-cognitive learning models and recent publications seeking to relate complex dynamic systems to language learning, render the learner autonomy model of the 1980s less relevant than it once was as a way of describing and prescribing the learning of English. The current availability of online audio, video and text documents and online communication tools, means that the English learner is involved in language use, often on a daily basis, before and perhaps without ever being enrolled in a formal language course, and is thus better described in the terms of action-oriented approaches as a user of the language and a social agent.

The “autonomous learner” construct was conceived of in a world in which regular direct contact with English and English users was not already a reality for many. The learner autonomy paradigm sees the need for learning resources to be made available in the context of a resource centre, and indeed many learning institutions continue to store large numbers of resources. Our research suggests that French non-specialist learners of English are involved in regular language use independently of any institutional structure and that an informal learning model is therefore currently a better paradigm to describe their learning of English. These learners are in a complex relationship with the environment of the target language, which they encounter in formal and informal contexts relating both to their major fields of study (using online resources in English) and their leisure activities, which include downloading or streaming TV series in their original version, and communicating with other English users through social networking sites. Such a learning experience was probably in the past available only to second language learners living in “immersion” contexts where the target language was spoken at large.

Any model of informal language learning should therefore include the concept that informal learning does not happen in the classroom or according to a fixed timetable, it is not the product of simply creating a more convivial atmosphere in the classroom, and indeed as an impromptu activity it may not be planned by

the learner. As such it can be seen as having links with other paradigms such as incidental learning.

Finally, the development of communication and media skills in general, in ways such as those recommended by Jenkins *et al.* (2006), see Appendix, may prove to be appropriate successors to the language learning strategies taught in the classroom since the 1990s, and as in the early years of strategy research, the development of a list of media skills specific to second language acquisition based on the Jenkins proposals may be a worthwhile step in further research in this field.

The present study is qualitative in nature and based on a self-report protocol. As such it is limited to that which the participants felt able to describe. The description of listening activities as “useful for pronunciation” for example, shows that meta-language is not always used appropriately. It may therefore be helpful in a follow-up study to involve students with some training in second language acquisition in order to gain further insights into these phenomena. While it may be tempting to bring informal learners into a laboratory situation and involve them in a study of eye movements and keyboard use, for example, such an approach may prove inferior to self-report in addressing informal learning as a system of interacting psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic phenomena.

The participants in the study are aware that learning has taken place, but are not well placed to measure what has been learned. Further studies, involving corpus analysis of the listening materials involved and testing on the most frequently occurring items, would be helpful in making this more explicit.

The findings of the study are drawn from the experiences of non-specialist learners of English in higher education in France and should not be taken as applicable to other contexts or, in particular, to other target languages. Further work is required on other populations, particularly school-age children in order to gain a more comprehensive view of this informal practice of English. Indeed, a complex systems view of language development suggests that each learner, with his or her specific range of resources and the interactions between them, experiences learning in a unique and personal way.

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Appendix

The Jenkins proposals (Jenkins *et al.*, 2006)

- Play — experimenting with surroundings as a form of problem-solving
- Performance — adopting alternative identities for improvisation and discovery
- Simulation — interpreting and constructing dynamic models of real processes
- Appropriation — meaningfully sampling and remixing media content
- Multitasking — scanning one's environment and shifting focus as needed
- Distributed Cognition — interacting with tools that expand mental capacities
- Collective Intelligence — pooling knowledge for a common goal
- Judgment — evaluating the reliability and credibility of information sources
- Transmedia Navigation — following the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities
- Networking — searching for, synthesizing, and disseminating information
- Negotiation — travelling across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms.