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A Possible Path to Progress: Out-of-school English Language Learners in Sweden

Pia Sundqvist

1. Introduction

In many countries around the globe, English is the first foreign language children learn in school. In Sweden, the teaching of English generally starts in third grade, that is, when the pupils are around 9 years old. By then, they usually already know some English as many of them have encountered the language in their spare time, for example through music, television, the internet, or other forms of media. In fact, there is a widespread belief that young people, teenagers in particular, learn much or even most of their English outside of school rather than in the language classroom. It is reasonable to assume that similar beliefs about teenagers’ out-of-school learning of English exist also in other countries where English dominates the media landscape. Due to the lack of research in the field, however, there is a need for evidence-based studies that examine the correctness of such assumptions (Higgins 2009; Sylvén 2004: 234).

This chapter presents findings from my PhD study (Sundqvist 2009), which mainly used quantitative methods, and aims to contribute to our understanding of language learning beyond the classroom. As will be argued below, young people’s skills in English are clearly affected by the activities they engage in – in English – outside the classroom, in their spare time. I will refer to such activities as extramural English and, furthermore, provide evidence of extramural English as, indeed, an important variable in language learning. In addition, the present chapter contributes to research on language learning beyond the classroom by showing that it is important to investigate not only how young people learn outside of class, but also in what way extramural English contributes to their proficiency. Finally, the chapter also pinpoints the importance of considering factors such as socioeconomic background and gender in the current field of research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Extramural English

I use the term ‘extramural English’ to refer to any type of contact that young people (learners) have with English outside the walls of the classroom. The first part of the term, extramural, is an adjectival compound of Latin origin where the prefix, extra, means ‘outside’ and the stem, mural, means ‘wall’. Extramural English is broadly defined and may, therefore, function as an umbrella term for other concepts used in this field of research, such as ‘out-of-class’ or ‘out-of-school’ English (Lamb 2004; Yi 2005), ‘unintentional’ learning of English (Forsman 2004), and ‘naturalistic’ or ‘self-directed naturalistic’ learning of English (Benson 2011). It should be pointed out that when I speak of extramural English, no degree of deliberate intention to acquire English is necessary on the part of the learner, even though deliberate intention is by no means excluded from the concept. This is in contrast to, for instance, self-directed naturalistic learning, where learners invariably have an intention to learn the target language, and they do so by creating naturalistic learning situations for themselves (Benson 2001: 77). In extramural English, learners’ contact with English may be due to their deliberate (thus conscious) intent to create situations for learning English, but it may equally well be due to other reasons. Theoretically, it builds on the principle of learner autonomy, originally defined by Holec (1981: 3) as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’. Learners take charge of their own learning when they choose to engage in linguistic activities outside of school. Finally, I would like to add that learners generally engage voluntarily in extramural English activities, but they may also feel pressured to do so, for example by their peers or parents.

2.2 Second language acquisition

For some time, researchers in Applied Linguistics have recognized that access to and participation in second language communities is an essential aspect of language learning. However, as Higgins (2009: 401–2) argues, little research has focused on the links between instructed contexts of second language (L2) learning and L2 use in other contexts. Furthermore, she states that the relationship between instructed language learning and use of the target language outside of school is ‘radically under-theorized’ (Higgins 2009: 402). Lack of empirical studies
may be one reason why this is the case. There are very few empirical
studies which combine data on out-of-school linguistic activities with
data on the level of the target language produced in school. The present
study attempts to partially fill that void in L2 acquisition research.
There is an abundance of theories available today on how learners
acquire a language other than their mother tongue. Even though it
appears to be difficult for the research community to reach consen-
sus on any one theory of L2 acquisition, few scholars would deny
the importance of interaction. In my study, the so-called ‘interaction
hypothesis’ serves as the theoretical framework:

the interaction approach considers exposure to language (input),
production of language (output), and feedback on production
(through interaction) as constructs that are important for under-
standing how second language learning takes place. (Gass and
Mackey 2006: 3–4)

The interaction hypothesis is related to extramural English in several
ways. For instance, learners are exposed to English input (aural and/
or written) when they listen to music, watch subtitled films/TV pro-
grammes, play video games, use sites on the internet, and read books
or magazines. In several extramural activities, learners also need to
produce output (oral and/or written) in English, for example when
they play online video games or use the internet, when they comment
on blogs, or when they sing along when listening to music, sometimes
with the lyrics at hand. With regard to online video game playing it
should be pointed out that there is constant feedback on both oral and
written production thanks to players’ interaction with one another
(Piiroinen-Marsh and Tainio 2009).

3. Research questions and design of study

The study is based on data from Swedish learners of English (N=80). The
informants, 36 boys and 44 girls, were all in ninth grade (aged 15–16).
They were in four classes at three schools, all situated in different
Swedish towns. Data were collected during one school year (2006–7).
The internal attrition rate was low (only 8 per cent) for a longitudinal
study, where the number of informants who drop out can often become
a problem and affect validity.

The main research question was as follows: Does extramural English
have an impact on students’ oral proficiency and vocabulary? In order to
answer the question, it was first necessary to identify what extramural
English activities the informants engaged in, and the extent to which
they engaged in such activities. Provided that a correlation between
extramural English and oral proficiency/vocabulary was found, other
research questions would follow: for instance, whether the amount of
time spent on extramural English was important, or if it is rather the
type of extramural activity that matters, or perhaps a combination of
both. Finally, the study aimed to determine whether extramural English
was linked to learners’ backgrounds (e.g. the educational level of the
parents, experience of travelling abroad) and learners’ motivation.

The students’ participation in extramural English was measured
with the help of a questionnaire and two week-long language diaries,
developed in collaboration with Liss Kerstin Sylvén, at the University of
Gothenburg. The language diary included seven predetermined extram-
ural English activities (reading books, reading newspapers/magazines,
watching TV, watching films, surfing the internet, playing video games, lis-
tening to music) and a final open category, where the informants were
invited to add other language activities. For each type of activity, the
informants were encouraged to note how much time they had spent
on it and to also provide additional information (book titles, names of
video games, and so forth). They filled out the diaries at home. I also
conducted a small number of student interviews (eight in total; two
students per class) in order to supplement my findings about extramural
English.

I would like to stress that the results on extramural English presented
in this chapter are mainly based on language diary data. For each
informant, the total amount of time spent on extramural English per
week as well as the time spent on each activity (also per week) was cal-
culated and used in subsequent analyses. The possibility of concurrent
extramural activities should be pointed out, such as listening to music
while surfing the internet. By use of method triangulation – including a
questionnaire and interviews in addition to the language diary – it was
possible for me to verify the results based on diary data.

The study also aimed to investigate learners’ development and level
of oral proficiency, and the size of their vocabulary. With regard to oral
proficiency, a total of 46 hours of speech data were collected with the
help of five speaking tests spaced throughout the school year. All tests
included interactive tasks and were so-called proficiency tests, that is,
they aimed to test global competence in English (Brown 2004: 44). The
students were assigned to random dyads on each test occasion. The five
tests were recorded (video and back-up audio) and examined by four
experienced raters. Each student was assessed by three of the four raters on each of the five tests. A total of 1140 forms of assessment (based on Hasselgren 1996) were collected. Based on assessment data, it was possible to arrive at a value for the level of oral proficiency for each student (henceforth the OP grade, 1–6). In my investigation of learners' development of oral proficiency, data collected from Tests 1, 3, and 5 were used. These three tests had the same format and were thus comparable.

The informants' vocabulary skills were measured with the help of shortened versions of widely used vocabulary tests, namely the Productive Levels Test (Laufer and Nation 1999) and the Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation 2001). In these tests, scores reflect the size of vocabulary. Based on the students' scores on the tests, it was possible to calculate a reliable Vocabulary Index Variable (Cronbach's alpha = .832) for each student.

Finally, questionnaire data were used to examine learners' backgrounds and motivation. Four socioeconomic background variables were included in the analyses: (1) the informants' experience of travel abroad, (2) their parents' educational background, (3) the number of books in the informants' homes, and (4) whether the students were from rural or urban areas. The number of books in the informants' homes was an attempt to capture and measure their cultural capital, as was done in Öquist and Wåhlin (2006). Cultural capital, a term coined by the French sociologist Bourdieu (1973: 71–112), is a sociological concept that refers to the education, knowledge, skills, and advantages of a person and which partly determines that person's status in society. With regard to motivation, two factors were included in the analyses, namely self-efficacy, defined as people's judgment of their own ability to carry out specific tasks (Dörnyei 2001: 22–3), and anxiety related to speaking English.

4. Results

4.1 Extramural English

Language diary data revealed that a majority of the students regularly spent time on extramural English, with a sample mean of 18.4 hours per week in total. However, the students varied a great deal in how much time they spent on extramural English and their values ranged from 0 to almost 60 hours per week. As expected, listening to music was the most popular extramural activity, averaging more than six hours per week. It was followed by playing video games, watching TV, watching films, surfing the internet, other activities, reading books, and finally, reading newspapers/magazines (see Table 1). Overall, the boys reported spending close to 21 hours per week on extramural English activities on average, which can be compared with 16.4 hours for the girls (non-significant difference; for exact p-values of findings presented in this chapter, see Sundqvist 2009). However, significant gender-related differences were found for two of the activities, namely playing video games and surfing the internet, where the results revealed that the boys spent more time on both. In fact, for the boys, video games and the internet accounted for as much as 43 per cent of their total amount of time spent on extramural English, whereas those activities made up only 6 per cent of the girls' total time.

One of the research questions concerned whether some activities are more important than others for learners' level of oral proficiency and size of vocabulary. To find an answer to that question, it was possible to use backward linear regression analysis, a function provided by the statistical software (SPSS). When using that type of regression analysis, one examines the relative importance of various variables (here the extramural English activities) in relation to a dependent variable (such as the OP grade or the Vocabulary Index Variable). In the present study, backward linear regression analyses revealed that playing video games, surfing the internet, reading books, and reading newspapers/magazines were relatively more important than listening to music, watching TV and watching films.

4.2 Oral proficiency and vocabulary

The mean OP grade for the whole sample was 3.4. The girls had a higher mean (3.5) than the boys (3.2), but the difference was non-significant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Amount of time spent on the extramural English activities, in order of popularity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Hours/week (sample mean)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to music</td>
<td>6.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing video games</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching films</td>
<td>2.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfing the Internet</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other activities</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading books</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading newspapers/magazines</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With regard to learners' development of oral proficiency, paired samples t tests revealed that there was a significant improvement over time from Test 1 (3.0) to Test 5 (3.9). The mean score on the Productive Levels Test was 16.1 points (out of 45) and on the Vocabulary Levels Test 60.1 (out of 90). The boys scored higher than the girls on both vocabulary tests, although only significantly higher on the test of receptive vocabulary (that is, the Vocabulary Levels Test).

4.3 Correlations between extramural English and oral proficiency/vocabulary

Spearman's rank order correlation ($r_s$) was used to analyse the relationship between extramural English and oral proficiency/vocabulary. Analyses showed that the total amount of time spent on extramural English correlated positively and significantly with both their level of oral proficiency (that is, the OP grade; $r_s = .307$) and the size of their vocabulary (that is, the Vocabulary Index Variable; $r_s = .357$).

For the boys, the correlation between extramural English and the OP grade was strongly positive and statistically significant ($r_s = .515$). The correlation between extramural English and vocabulary was even stronger ($r_s = .590$). This means that as much as 27 per cent of the variation in the boys' OP grades and 35 per cent of the variation in their vocabulary scores could be accounted for by extramural English rather than by chance or by some other variable. That is, the boys' proficiency in English (as measured by the OP grade and the Vocabulary Index Variable) had a clear connection with their engagement in extramural English activities. In stark contrast, the correlations between extramural English and oral proficiency/vocabulary were negligible and non-significant for the girls ($r_s = .118$ for oral proficiency; $r_s = .011$ for vocabulary). In other words, basically nothing of the variation in the girls' OP grades or vocabulary scores was accounted for by extramural English. Thus, the results of the present study clearly reveal a gender-related difference.

4.4 Learners' backgrounds and motivation

The amount and type of extramural English had no relationship with learners' socioeconomic backgrounds. Oral proficiency, however, clearly had. There was, for instance, a relationship between learners' OP grades and their experience of travelling abroad, especially if they had travelled outside Europe. The sample was divided into four groups, based on student responses in the questionnaire about experiences of travelling abroad. I found that the farther they had travelled, the higher their OP grade. No similar pattern regarding travel and extramural English could be identified. Similarly, the informants who had university-educated parents received higher OP grades than those who did not have university-educated parents but, in contrast, no such connection was found between extramural English and the educational level of the parents. Learners' level of oral proficiency and the cultural capital of their homes, as measured by the number of books, also correlated. Those who came from homes with a strong cultural capital were awarded higher OP grades (3.6) than those who came from homes with a smaller cultural capital (3.2; sig. difference), which is in line with findings from previous studies (see Òquist and Wikström 2006). In fact, the more books the learners reported having at home, the higher their OP grades were. In contrast, there was no relationship between the students' cultural capital and their amount of extramural English. This pattern—socioeconomic background variables correlating with oral proficiency but not with extramural English—was partly repeated when the fourth variable was investigated, namely 'rural versus urban residency'. As it turned out, those who lived in rural areas received lower OP grades (3.1) than those who lived in urban areas (3.7; sig.). Breaking the pattern, this time extramural English also had a connection with the investigated background variable; the students from urban settings reported a greater amount of extramural English per week in comparison with the rural residents (22.4 hours vs. 15.9; sig.).

With regard to learners' motivation, two factors were analysed in the study, self-efficacy and anxiety related to speaking. Both correlated with extramural English and oral proficiency. For self-efficacy, the results revealed a positive and significant correlation with extramural English. Again, there was a gender difference; self-efficacy and extramural English correlated much more positively and strongly for boys than it did for girls. There was no major gender difference, on the other hand, with respect to the correlations between self-efficacy and oral proficiency. Both for the boys and the girls there were statistically significant positive correlations between the two variables. The second motivational factor investigated was anxiety related to speaking, which had a non-significant negligible correlation with extramural English. However, there was a significant negative correlation with the activity playing video games, which means that those who reported playing video games in English also reported feeling less anxious if they played more games. Finally, the students who received the lowest OP grades reported the highest values for anxiety.
5. Discussion

The study yielded several important results relating to language learning beyond the language classroom. The key findings of my study are, first of all, the identified positive and significant correlations between learners’ extramural English and their level of oral proficiency as well as size of vocabulary. Previous results from learner self-assessment and introspection studies suggest a positive influence of out-of-school language activities on learner English (see, for example, Forsman 2004; Lamb 2004). It is possible that my study empirically corroborates that suggestion, but it has to be emphasized that it is very difficult to really know what the direction of causality is between any two variables. Nevertheless, my interpretation is that extramural English has an effect on learners’ oral proficiency and vocabulary. I would like to point out, however, that stronger students are generally more able to engage in extramural English activities. The relationship between learners’ extramural English and their proficiency could, therefore, be bidirectional or mutually reinforcing. It is also worth mentioning that some students did not spend much time at all on English in their spare time, something which at least partly contradicts the widespread belief that all teenagers learn a great deal of English outside of school. Moreover, the possibility of engaging concurrently in various extramural English activities clearly was one reason why some students had very high values for extramural English.

Another key finding relates to the type of extramural activities that learners engage in: some activities are more important than others for learners’ oral proficiency and vocabulary. Playing video games, surfing the internet, reading books and reading newspapers/magazines were relatively more important than listening to music, watching TV and watching films. The former group of activities requires learners to be active/productive and to rely heavily on their language skills, whereas, in comparison, the latter group of activities generally allows for learners to remain fairly passive/receptive.

The type of activity favoured revealed a gender pattern, which is yet another key finding. The boys spent significantly more time on productive activities than the girls. Consequently, the results for boys and girls were radically different in the correlation analyses between extramural English and oral proficiency on the one hand, and extramural English and vocabulary on the other. The correlations were strongly positive and significant for the boys but negligible and non-significant for the girls (a pattern that also appeared for self-efficacy and extramural English). This means that whether the girls engaged in a large or a small amount of extramural English did not seem to matter. The lack of statistical significance in the correlation analyses for the girls makes their results slightly more difficult to interpret than the results for boys. Nevertheless, the conclusion is that the boys and the girls engaged in different types of extramural English activities, which explains why the correlations were so strong for the boys, but negligible for the girls. The boys spent significantly more time on those extramural English activities which were most important for oral proficiency and vocabulary, at least as measured in this study. As it turned out, the boys benefited from doing so. Data from the questionnaire and the interviews supported these gender-related findings.

Another comment on gender relates to vocabulary. Since statistics from the Swedish National Agency for Education show that girls do better than boys in learning languages (see www.skolverket.se), it was unexpected that the boys in my study indeed scored higher on both vocabulary tests. The explanation as to why the boys did particularly well on vocabulary is found beyond the language classroom in the boys’ extramural English activities, more specifically in their habits related to playing video games and using the Internet in English. (As the regression analysis showed, those were two important activities.) Finally, it should be emphasized that there are, of course, other variables than extramural English that affect students’ results in school, such as motivation and aptitude. The importance of this study, however, is that it shows that extramural English, which represents learning beyond the language classroom, plays an important role in second language acquisition that should not be overlooked.

This evidence-based argument for the value of language learning outside school was corroborated by qualitative data from learner interviews. One of the interviewees, a boy who did exceptionally well on the vocabulary tests and who was also awarded high grades for oral proficiency, was able to give a detailed description of how his English skills had developed over the years. For instance, he had gone from playing simple video games and watching English-speaking TV shows with Swedish subtitles to interacting almost daily both in speech and writing with native speakers while playing video games. Several of his online friends were British. In addition, he enjoyed watching English-language films and now, at the age of 15, even preferred using English to Swedish subtitles. Furthermore, it was not unusual for him to think in English, and occasionally he had in fact started speaking English to Swedish friends before realizing his mistake and switching back to Swedish, his
first language. This student’s level of proficiency was high considering his age, and based on what he said, it was obvious that he had been extensively involved in extramural English over the years. Excerpt 1 (from Test 5) is provided to illustrate his use of what must be considered advanced vocabulary in speech (note *tinnitus*, *supply* and *earplugs*). In the excerpt, he (Boy) is discussing the sound level at concerts together with a classmate (Girl).

**Excerpt 1.** Sample speech from a student (Boy) who reported a great amount of extramural English and who excelled in English both with regard to his level of oral proficiency and his size of vocabulary.

Boy yeah (3.3) uh () the sound level at concerts and discos are dangerous () uh () if you’re close to the
Girl yeah
Boy speakers then () I suppose you can get some (1.7) tinnitus and such () but they () do supply you with earplugs so
Girl yeah
Boy it’s your own risk if you don’t use them

*Comment:* Pause length in brackets (seconds). Pause length < 1 second = ()

With regard to the investigation of learner backgrounds, it is possible to claim that whereas oral proficiency was clearly connected with all four socioeconomic variables, this was not the case for extramural English. Instead, extramural English functioned as an independent variable, something which makes it a potential means for any learner in Sweden. As for learner motivation, the explanation why the correlation between self-efficacy and extramural English was strongly positive and not random for the boys (but the opposite for the girls) is most likely also linked to the identified gender-related difference regarding types of extramural English. For example, the boys were heavily involved in playing video games and using the internet and could, thus, see for themselves that they actually managed to carry out specific tasks in English, such as writing and talking to other players. Video game playing in particular involves a great deal of such L2 output, both spoken and written. In addition, video game playing entails negotiation of meaning between players; the benefits for second language acquisition have been shown (Sylvén 2004; Pilrainen-Marsh and Tainio 2009).

Since the boys played video games more frequently than the girls, it seems very likely that it positively affected their self-efficacy and also lessened their anxiety about speaking English (Pappamihiel 2002). Finally, the very positive and strong correlation between the learners’ level of oral proficiency and their self-efficacy was expected and in line with previous findings in the field of motivation and L2 acquisition (Dörnyei 2001).

6. Conclusion

It is difficult to establish cause and effect of the various findings of this study. For example, do learners become more proficient as a result of their extramural English, or do they become engaged in more extramural English because of their higher proficiency? In addition, the results reveal rather complex relationships at play in language learning beyond the walls of the classroom. Nevertheless, it was clear that the total amount of time that the Swedish learners spent on extramural English correlated positively and significantly with both (a) their level of oral proficiency and (b) the size of their vocabulary. Moreover, it was shown that the type of extramural English also mattered. Furthermore, it turned out that the activities favoured by the learners revealed a gender pattern. The boys spent significantly more time on productive extramural English activities than the girls and, therefore, extramural English had a greater impact on the boys’ than on the girls’ oral proficiency and vocabulary.

With the help of quantitative methods, the present study could identify important relationships between what learners do outside of school and what they achieve in school. In fact, quantitative methods enable researchers to use large samples in their analyses of language learning beyond the language classroom. With large samples, researchers can make reliable comparisons between different learner populations, types of extramural activities, background variables, and so on. Findings from such quantitative studies provide a solid base for further research about language learning beyond the classroom and facilitate formulating new and relevant research questions. Some such questions could relate to type of extramural English activity, age, and gender. For instance, is learners’ use of advanced vocabulary in speech and writing related to their type of extramural English? Is the profile for specific learners regarding their extramural English activities more or less constant, or does it change with age? It would thus be interesting to map out extramural English for young learners and study how it develops over time for them. In particular, it would be interesting to see whether the gender
pattern that has been discussed in this chapter can be discerned already at an early age.

To conclude, extramural English was not connected with any of the socioeconomic background variables investigated in this study. The explanation for this might be that the present study was carried out in Sweden, where there is a certain baseline of social wealth and where English (and computers) are easily accessible, as in many other developed countries. Nevertheless, with this caveat in mind, a final and to my mind very important conclusion is that extramural English is an independent variable, valuable in its own right. It means that extramural English is, in fact, a possible path to progress in English for any learner, regardless of his or her socioeconomic background.

Note

1. The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r$) was used to measure interrater reliability, which ranged from 0.451 to 0.730 ($p < .01$). Hasselgren (1997: 243-4) considers a minimum value of $r$ at .4 as 'reasonable' for OP grades.

9

Teenagers Learning Languages Out of School: What, Why and How Do They Learn? How Can School Help Them?

Sophie Bailly

1. Introduction

Due to the shortage of language teachers in France, some schools are no longer able to promote the development of multilingual and multicultural competences that society and individuals value. Meanwhile, the traditional extensive group language teaching model favoured in French schools is being challenged by increasing access to means of learning foreign languages beyond the school, due for instance to the development of international exchanges and new communication media. The globalized world provides a variety of resources for satisfying language learning needs when school is not enough. Thanks to the internet, resources for learning are easily accessible to almost anyone, including to school students, who can nowadays learn school subjects, including foreign languages, almost without going to class or being taught.

This chapter explores the relationships between in-school and out-of-school learning of foreign languages that are not taught at school. It draws on a research project that was designed to explore the conditions under which high school students can succeed in independent language learning (Bailly et al. 2008). First of all, I will present the project on which this research is based. Then I will present findings about the students' out-of-school language learning under the following headings: the languages the students study outside school and why; the way they learn out of class; and the difficulties they meet.

2. The context of the research

The research was carried out over a period of four years in an urban high school in the east of France. This school is a lycée des métiers, meaning