



Language learning in the wild: A young user perspective

Signe Hannibal Jensen, University of Southern Denmark

Abstract

Through the analytical lens of activity theory (Leontiev, 1978, Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), the present study investigates the uptake of affordances for language learning by young (ages 7–11) Danish children (N = 15) in their engagement with English language media in the digital wild. Drawing on ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979), during which the participants engaged in online English language activities (e.g., gaming, snapchatting, etc.), the study shows that most of the participants were motivated in their engagement with English by social and higher cognitive motives (Lompscher, 1999). They engaged substantially with affordances for language learning (i.e., deliberately chose English-language content over Danish), engaged in chats, and read and listened to online content. Some, on the other hand, were found to be motivated by lower cognitive motives, resulting in less engagement with the affordances. The study also found a substantial difference between perceptions of English in and outside school. The study adds new insights to an under-researched area, while giving voice to young users of English, as called for by Ushioda (2008, p. 29).

Keywords: *Extramural English, Young Learners, Motivation, Activity Theory*

Language(s) Learned in This Study: *English*

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Introduction and Aims

This article focuses on the engagement of Danish 7- to 11-year-old children (young users)¹ with English-language activities in the wild²—an “exogenous activity system ... not directly related to education” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 225)—and the specific uptake of language-learning affordances related to this engagement (Gibson, 2012). Research on children’s use of English as a mediating language for activities in the wild is becoming increasingly important with English as the lingua franca of the world—even being coined a “basic educational skill” (Ushioda, 2011, p. 1)—and the popularity of Web 2.0. Only few studies have been conducted on the content of, or engagement with, English in the wild for young users. A few qualitative studies exist (e.g., Piirainen-Marsh, 2011; Turgut & İrgin, 2009), but studies are mostly quantitative in nature (e.g., De Wilde & Eyckmans, 2017; Hannibal Jensen, 2017; Kuppens, 2010; Lindgren & Muñoz, 2013; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012; Unsworth, Persson, Prins, & De Bot, 2014). While providing useful mappings and overviews of type and intensity of engagement and identifying possible correlations with language learning, quantitative studies do not reveal specific details of the engagement, such as the nature of the engagement, the nature of the activities engaged in, and the specific purposes of the engagement with the second language (L2). However, these questions seem particularly apt for gaining knowledge on the nature of the learning process in the wild.

This study adds details of young users’ engagement with English in the wild and additionally provides a description of the affordances for language learning that are taken up by children in their engagement. Through an emic focus grounded in an activity-theory framework, the study provides a thick description of the informal activity system (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 225), thus providing insights into an informal young learner context. As Ushioda (2008) notes, “research insights from learners themselves in a variety

of learning contexts are much needed to substantiate and inform our theorizing” (p. 29).

Following an introduction of the research topic, the article briefly describes some previous studies on engagement with English in the wild among young users. Hereafter, the activity theory (AT) theoretical framework is introduced, by relating a few studies within AT. Subsequently, the study is described (i.e., methodology, ethics, and design), followed by its findings and a discussion. Finally, remarks on limitations and suggestions for further research are made and the paper is rounded off with a conclusion including pedagogical implications.

Background

English in Denmark

Anglo language and culture enjoy high status in Denmark, with English being promoted top-down as well as bottom-up. A 2014 governmental decision to lower the starting age for learning English from 3rd to 1st grade in primary school, as well as the decision by Danish universities to offer many degree programs exclusively in English (Study in Denmark, 2017), bear evidence of such top-down promotions of English. Furthermore, with the airing of locally produced shows by Danish national television with titles such as *Iza's Stepz* or *Pendler kids*, the value of Anglo culture is clearly recognized. A case in point of the bottom-up promotion of English is YouTube productions made by children and young people; where popularity lists reveal that 50% of the 100 most popular Danish YouTubers have assumed English names (DreamModels.dk, 2017).

English, to a considerable extent, gains its status bottom-up via digital and online media. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the rise of Web 2.0 or to disregard the importance of children as digital consumers. Mascheroni and Ólafsson (2014) report in a summary of a European survey, EU Kids Online, that the average European child goes online at the age of nine; for Danish children, the online debut starts at the age of seven. Furthermore, 79% of European children use the Internet every day, compared to the Danish average of 94%. Additionally, 55% of European children between the ages of 9 and 16 have access to the Internet at home in their own bedroom, compared to 77% in Denmark. It is fair to assume that a lot of this engagement is mediated in English and is spent on various leisure activities, as the default language of digital games is English (Waters, 2007). In fact, Hannibal Jensen (2017) found that Danish children between the ages of 8 and 10 spend an average of six hours weekly engaging in English-language activities in the digital wild.

Previous Studies on Language Learning in the Wild

Research on language learning by young users in the wild is scarce. However, existing research suggests that language learning in such a context is possible. In an Icelandic study, Lefever (2010) showed how parents attribute their children's L2 English knowledge, gained before formal English schooling, to extramural English language activities. It was speculated that the boys' conversational skills, which were superior to the girls', might be attributed to gaming. In a study on 11- to 12-year-old children, Sylvén and Sundqvist (2012) found a positive relationship between extramural English gaming and listening comprehension, reading abilities, and vocabulary. Similarly, Sundqvist and Sylvén (2014), in a study on 10-year-olds, reported that frequent gamers were highly motivated for language learning. In a study on extramural English gaming, Hannibal Jensen (2017) showed how Danish children's—notably boys'—gaming activities were related to their vocabulary scores (see also, Kuppens, 2010; Lindgren & Muñoz, 2013). In a study using conversation analysis, Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009) investigated gameplay between young Finnish boys (10–14 years old) and found evidence for language learning through engagement with game terminology, repetition, and imitation. Also, Turgut and İrgin (2009), through observational studies and semi-structured interviews, found that Turkish children (ages 10–14) playing games at an internet café had opportunities for vocabulary learning through their motivated use of strategies for understanding unknown vocabulary. Thus, research confirms the fruitfulness of investigating language learning in the wild and the need to add more qualitative perspectives to the research.

Theoretical Background

The present study focuses on “learning through activity” (Lompscher, 1999, p. 13) in the wild, often referred to as *incidental learning*, through an AT framework. Incidental learning is understood as “learning in various activity modes (play, everyday communication, work, etc.) without any special learning goal (incidental learning as a result of activity directed towards other goals than learning)” (Lompscher, 1999, pp. 13–14). A variety of factors are considered important for incidental and intentional language learning. In particular, the importance of motivation has a long history in L2 acquisition research and a prominent place within AT. This following section discusses motivation in relation to language learning, mainly from an AT perspective.

In the past decades, L2 motivation research has moved beyond considering learner-internal variables in isolation to recognizing the importance of social and contextual factors, such as the learning environment and experience for motivation (see Djigunovic & Basaric, 2007; Dörnyei, 2009a; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Pavlenko, 2002; Ushioda, 2008). Importantly, motivation is increasingly being viewed as an unstable force subject to fluctuations, rather than as a stable learner-internal variable (see Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Nardi, 1996). Notably, the notion of *investment* has become important, recognizing that the presence of motivation does not guarantee investment in language learning. Learners may show little investment in learning a language, despite being very motivated. They may find the learning experience detrimental to their values and consequently refrain from investing in language learning. On the other hand, if the learning experience supports the learner’s sense of identity and is seen to enable attractive future identities, the learner is likely to invest in the learning process (Norton, 2013). The concept of identity has long been of interest in motivational L2 research in relation to motivated behavior. This could be driven either by desire for integration into a specific ethnolinguistic community (as especially espoused by Gardner, 1988) or by identification wanting to “become part of a wider, global community” (Henry & Cliffordson, 2015, p. 2; see also Dörnyei, 2009a; Ushioda, 2008). Generally, it is found that positive identification with the target language community (be it for integration or not) may positively affect the motivation to learn and speak the language of a given community or culture (Dörnyei, 2009b).

The underlying motives for the action of individuals is central in AT, making it a useful method for investigating motivational processes in learning (Ushioda, 2007). In AT, the notion of *activity* denotes the specific doings of individuals when they participate in various tasks, thus differing from the conventional definition of an activity (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 234). Importantly, the idea that tasks are carried out in a uniform manner is rejected—that is, that individuals will invariably carry out different activities although engaging in similar tasks (for a discussion of task vs. activity, see Coughlan & Duff, 1994). This is because individuals are guided in their personal actions by, among other factors, their motives and goals. In other words, “the orientation of the individual is key to how any task is carried out” (McCafferty, Roebuck, & Wayland, 2001, p. 293).

AT distinguishes three overall analytical levels of behavior in an activity system. The first level, called the *activity level*, is “motivated by needs and desires” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 216) and may help uncover why actions take place. This level is concerned with the underlying motives guiding the direction and nature of an activity (Lompscher, 1999, p. 13). That is, a need or desire creates in the individual a motive for pursuing an objective. The way this objective is carried out is determined by the nature of the motives. Second, the *level of action* aims to uncover the actual actions taking place—that is, the character and direction of the activity (based on its motives). Third, *the level of operations* uncovers how actions are carried out (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Three groups of motives are identified as being of key significance for learning, whereof social and cognitive motives are important in the present context (Lompscher, 1999, p. 16). The *social motive* for engagement and learning involves identification with other persons, as well as the desire to be part of significant groups. Thus, an overarching socially-based motive is the personal significance of a given activity (i.e., learners will act on motives of personal significance to them; see Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). Thus, AT also draws on the relevance of emotions, as what is significant to individuals is tied to their emotions (Lompscher, 1999). Higher and lower *cognitive motives* for learning are also

important. The former type of motive is intrinsic and develops through intensive recurring activities (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). The type of motivation arising from such a motive inspires learners to engage with learning, not for the sake of a concrete end result, but for the sake of learning and engaging with the subject. The latter type of motive refers to learning for the mere purpose of meeting requirements, such as, for example, passing a course. These different motives lead to different types of motivation and different ways of engagement (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Nardi, 1996). AT studies, as those presented below, show the significance of these different types of motives for learning.

Based on learner logs and interviews, Gillette (1994) conducted a study of learners of French, half effective and the other half ineffective learners (based on proficiency tests). Findings showed that learners' motives and past learning experiences guided their behavior in class. Engagement in class was based either on the motive of truly wanting to learn the language (higher cognitive motives), or by more instrumental motives of fulfilling the course requirements (lower cognitive motives). Learners motivated by lower cognitive orientations were found to limit their efforts to a minimum. Whereas, in contrast, the effective learners put in more effort than required. The students were found to both differ in their levels of investment (cf. Norton, 2013) as well as ways of engagement. For example, only the effective learners utilized the more effective strategy of inferencing (p. 203) along with using dictionaries. The ineffective learners relied merely on dictionary use, which they found frustrating and ineffective, speculated to be due to a failure to meaningfully integrate the words into the appropriate context. Gillette noted that effective learners used more functional strategies which are more productive (1994, p. 204).

Another AT study, carried out by McCafferty et al. (2001), also emphasized the importance of the functionality of language use for incidental learning. In an experimental study on foreign language learning, the researchers found that in specific tasks created for the experiment, words which were closely connected to carrying out goal-directed actions were better retained than less-prominent words in the tasks. Words closely connected to carrying out the goals of the tasks were learner-generated words, pre-given words that learners actively used themselves, or words that needed defining for learners to proceed with the activity (p. 292).

The significance of the learning environment in shaping learner motives has also been investigated by AT studies, highlighting the inherently unstable nature of motivation (cf. Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). Lantolf and Genung (2002) found that a highly-motivated language learner became increasingly demotivated by the learning context and shifted from having higher cognitive to lower cognitive motives for learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Their subject, PG, was a graduate student and colonel in the U.S. Army learning Chinese. Initially PG was very motivated to learn the language. However, she quickly found that the learning environment was counterproductive to her identity as a learner, being based on drills rather than interaction (cf. Norton, 2013). Consequently, PG's motivation went from a higher cognitive orientation of genuine interest in learning the language to a lower cognitive orientation where she merely put in the effort needed to pass the course.

Agency and motives are also mediated by material and symbolic tools, as well as by social formations (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 239). In a study on a university student (Kristen) studying French, Thorne (2003) found that technology and sociality changed Kristen's motives and engagement in the learning process in a positive direction toward what could be interpreted as social and higher cognitive motives for engagement. For a French university course, Kirsten was assigned a French partner, Oliver, with whom she was to engage in exchange via email. After a delay where Kirsten did not hear from Oliver, causing her much frustration, they started chatting and quickly replaced email with an online instant messenger, providing quick and flexible communication. The use of this more flexible tool along with the social nature of the exchanges—where Kirsten and Oliver became friends rather than educational partners—afforded much language learning. Through the chats, Kirsten discovered, to her pride, that she was able to engage in meaningful conversations in French. She also picked up on grammar points that she had previously not been able to learn. Oliver's feedback along with Kirsten's attention to his conversational use of the language, helped her internalize these uses. One benefit of the chat exchange highlighted by Thorne (2003) was that,

besides creating a highly authentic L2 environment, it also afforded possibilities to co-construct meaning with others within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), identified as highly beneficial for language learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Vosburg (2017) conducted a study with American college students studying German. The students played World of Warcraft on a German server for eight weeks by attending two 90-minute gaming sessions each week. They played from home, trying to create an out-of-school environment. Each was assigned to a team consisting of a German native speaker, (a language guide, or LG), one experienced player, one novice, and other randomly assigned players. The study examined the effects of native speaker presence and effect of group dynamics on language learning, specifically on the productive use of the L2 and on motivation. The study was based on chat transcripts and interviews. Participants were instructed to use as much German as possible, and the LG was asked to let conversations arise naturally. The study found that the LG was perceived as the single most important factor in relation to motivation and language practice and in relation to gains from feedback and interaction. Group dynamics, however, were primarily viewed negatively. The groups had little in common, little to talk about, and had different levels of motivation for learning German. Some were highly motivated, and others merely wished to pass their class. Thus, the potential benefits of being part of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), possibly leading to social and higher cognitive learning motives, were absent. The potential benefits of participation in a community of practice is to learn from social participation through engagement. Participation in such communities is inspired by a common ground around which the community is formed (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Despite the difference in focus between the studies above and the present study (i.e., formal vs. informal contexts), the AT framework seems particularly apt for investigating learning in informal contexts due to the emic view of learner motives and actions (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 238; see also Nardi, 1996). By investigating which motives lie behind the engagement with English-language mediated activities and by examining the actions that are carried out based on these motives (i.e., how the language is being engaged with), much knowledge may be gained about young users' engagement with affordances for language learning in the wild.

The present study poses the following two research questions:

1. Which motives (social and cognitive) are children driven by in their use of English in L2 English-mediated activities?
2. How do children engage with L2 English based on their motives?

The Study

Method

Participants

Fifteen children were part of the present study (see [Table 1](#)). The participants were tied to a government-funded project on the importance of age for learning English (Cadierno & Eskildsen, 2014). Participants were selected for the present study based on two criteria: (a) they engaged regularly in English-language activities outside school (set to seven hours of weekly engagement) and (b) they engaged in gender-typical activities as described by Hannibal Jensen (2017; i.e., the boys primarily engaged in gaming and YouTube watching and girls in net-based activities, music, and some gaming). Selection was based on language diaries (LDs) and talks at project schools. The participants had all reported engagement with English in the wild in a 1-week LD, (for details, see Hannibal Jensen, 2017). Furthermore, the researcher was present in the project schools during the three data collection rounds, providing opportunities to talk to children about their L2 habits in the wild as well as to establish rapport (Gibson, 2012). Based on the LDs and talks, seven focal participants were selected for interviews in congruence with the above-mentioned selection criteria (see the names in bold type in [Table 1](#)). For the focus children who engaged in such activities with friends (i.e., Alvira, Ferdinand, Sean, and Vivian), the friends were also recruited, providing an authentic view of

their engagement in focus group interviews. Three focal participants engaged primarily alone and were, therefore, and for ecological validity, interviewed individually (i.e., Antonio, Arnold, and Nina).

Table 1. *Participants*

Interview Type	Interview No.	Name	Gender	Age
Group	1	Ferdinand	M	11
		Karl (friend)	M	11
Group	2	Alvira	F	11
		Karen (friend)	F	11
		Katharina (friend)	F	11
		Sheila (friend)	F	11
Group	3	Sean	M	9
		Niels (friend)	M	9
		Robert (friend)	M	9
Group	4	Vivian	F	9
		Serena (friend)	F	9
		Johanne (friend)	F	9
Individual	5	Antonio	M	11
Individual	6	Arnold	M	9
Individual	7	Nina	F	7

Notes. The names in this study are aliases. The ages are those at the time of the interviews.

Ethics

Informed parental consent was obtained via emails prior to all interviews. Participants appeared comfortable and interested in sharing their knowledge. All the data were anonymized, and the participants were given pseudonyms.

Design

Interviews were conducted in Danish after school hours in the fall of 2016. The study employed descriptive ethnographic interviewing (Spradley, 1979). The participants took the interviewer on a guided tour through the English-mediated activities they engaged in on a regular basis by engaging in the activities while being interviewed. Spradley notes that “descriptive questions aim to elicit a large sample of utterances in the informants’ native language” (1979, p. 49) and can provide an extensive knowledge about the lifeworlds of the participants. In total, there were four focus group interviews and three individual interviews. Each interview was video recorded and lasted 60–90 minutes.

Analysis and Methodology

Data were transcribed verbatim including non-linguistic details of relevance to the utterances (e.g., “child typing: ‘Best goals ever,’”) and were subsequently imported into NVivo. All instances of engagement (actions) with English, along with details of the engagement were identified (e.g., “watching YouTube”) and coded as *engagement with English*. Subsequently, these actions were grouped according to motives (social and higher and lower cognitive). When possible, motives were grounded in an emic perspective (i.e., the child would explicitly state a motive). When not, they were grounded in the researcher’s interpretation and analysis of the child’s action. Within the coding for motives, actions were also coded according to strategy (i.e., strategies for understanding unknown linguistic items and for using English, thus highlighting

strategy use in relation to motive). These categories were found relevant given their focus in previous AT studies (cf. Gillette, 1994).

The coding process was iterative throughout. Recordings were watched on numerous occasions, the transcripts scrutinized for familiarization, and the coding was subject to numerous discussions with fellow researchers. One code, *speaking English* (i.e., instances where children code-switched and used English rather than Danish), was very comprehensive and was therefore left out, to be discussed elsewhere. All the examples were translated into English by the researcher.

Findings and Discussion

Findings showed that the young users, to a large degree, seemed driven by social and higher cognitive motives in their engagement with English. By token of their great interest in the activities, the children engaged extensively with English. 11-year-old Alvira, for example, engaged in many different activities. She watched Netflix series, such as *Gossip Girls*, with English dialogue (sometimes Danish subtitles), subscribed to English-language written lifehacks via Instagram (for good advice or daily quotes), followed people on Snapchat, and watched various American vloggers (for advice on fashion and their lives in general). Many of the older girls read and listened to English-language updates on various social media sites (e.g., Snapchat) and occasionally also made written comments in English. 7-year-old Nina, on the other hand, played games and watched a great number of fairytale-like YouTube videos on these games. Similarly, the boys would play different games and watch YouTube videos on different topics, such as gaming walkthroughs or various challenges. Some (Antonio, Arnold, Ferdinand, and Karl) would also engage in online chats. Below, children's specific engagements with the L2 are discussed in two subsections: (a) higher cognitive and social motives and (b) lower cognitive motives.

Higher Cognitive and Social Motives

Personal Significance

Findings showed that both the content and the mediating language of the activities were of great personal significance to the children. The following statements exemplify such positive sentiments:

Ferdinand: *I think English sounds kinda more, it's a cooler language.*

Arnold: *I know that here [YouTube/game] they speak English fluently and I like that better [than school English].*

Antonio: *Well, the other [school English] that's kind of a lot stranger than what I normally hear—it's like a different accent and stuff.*

Serena: *They [English-speaking YouTubers as opposed to Danish] know more [in general].*

Most of the children stated that English-language activities were more interesting (more up to date) than Danish language activities, motivating them to seek to understand the content. In fact, based on content and language, most of the children clearly stated that they preferred to watch YouTube videos mediated in English rather than Danish. It is interesting to note that Antonio (above) stated how "school English" was stranger than what he "normally hears," indicating that, to him, English was the norm in the wild, even at the early age of 11. Similarly, Arnold (age nine) found English in the wild to be preferred over school English, and even over Danish. Alvira, on the other hand, noted that she found English inside and outside school complementary, stating that she learned "girly" words outside school, whereas her basic vocabulary was learned in school.

Clearly, engaging with and investing in the English language outside school offered the children attractive possibilities, and was of great personal significance, motivating investment in using the language (cf. Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Norton, 2013).

Another salient reflection of the positive status of English was found in the children's use of Anglo-

sounding names for their gaming characters (e.g., Milky, Hank, Fluff, GGUSA)—a custom identified by Bechar-Israeli (1995) as a way of “highlighting” and “playing” with identity (p. 15). This practice mirrored Danish YouTubers’ use of Anglo names (cf. DreamModels.dk, 2017), clearly testifying of the bottom-up promotion of English. The children thus identified positively with the people and the content of the Anglo space, stating this explicitly and showing it implicitly by playing with Anglo identities themselves. Keeping in mind the importance of personal significance and positive emotions toward using (and learning) the language found in studies by Gillette (1994) and Thorne (2003), it is safe to assume that the children in the present study, when possible, had the incentive to engage actively and positively with the mediating language (see also Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Norton, 2013).

Sociality of Engagement

AT emphasizes how language learning is inherently social in nature, initially taking place in the social sphere to later become internalized by the individual. Thus, learning is not seen as an individual process aimed at the mere acquisition of linguistic forms, but rather as a socially-, externally-, as well as internally-mediated process aimed at participation in the sociocultural world (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Findings in the present study highlight how the use of L2 English in the wild offers opportunities to become part of a wider community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Indeed, they show that some of the children were motivated to use English by their wishes to engage in and be part of different communities of practice (e.g., communities around specific games). The participants were aware of—and most were not reluctant to—the fact that engagement with English was required to participate. A good example of this was the choice of English-mediated activities over Danish-language activities, even when the language settings offered a choice. Antonio noted the following:

I mostly have [games] in English because then it's easier to find something when everybody else has it in English and then if [YouTubers] call it something I can't just go look it up when it's in Danish [in the game] ... And then what is it really called in Danish, umm?

Thus, the choice of English was not only founded on necessity or because the fun activities were in English, but also, importantly, on the wish to be part of a larger community of expertise. That is, in order to benefit from knowledge, as found on YouTube for example (which, according to the children, offered an immense community of expertise within the gaming world), it was advisable to keep within the default language, English. Furthermore, the example shows an important interrelation between the language of playing games and watching YouTube videos, which was evident throughout the data and which seemed to provide ample opportunities for situated engagement with English. All children who played games would watch some type of complementary YouTube video on the gaming topic. We may speculate that the association between images from the games—relatable from personal, meaningful engagement in games—coupled with words and images on YouTube would be beneficial for language learning. This is because the user was personally engaged in the activity of playing the game as well emotionally engaged with the cognitive operations surrounding the engagement with the YouTube videos. Summed up by Gee, (2012) “players learn by doing, and they have images and experiences to give deep meaning to the words and texts they read [and hear] later, in order to resource their play and learning.” (p. xii).

Some of the children would play online games and would join English-speaking teams. Through this, they gained access to an extended world of English and engaged with affordances for language learning by putting the language to active use (cf. McCafferty et al., 2001; Swain, 2000). They told the researcher that participation in online games required attention to the chat or one could be “thrown off the team.” Game play and advancement was not the only reason for engaging in chats. Karl also specifically noted the importance of the social aspect. Interestingly, Arnold (age nine) told the researcher that he would engage in chats in accordance with his abilities; he would try to read the chats but, due to his age, was unable yet to write chats himself. However, he was clearly drawn by the interesting universe offered by the chat.

Antonio described engaging in a series of chats with an American gamer (called Big Ace) and getting help in Sky Factory (a mod pack for Minecraft):

Well, through Sky Factory in the beginning Thomas [a friend] and I helped each other. Then he didn't want to play anymore, and I couldn't ask him to help because then he was no longer updated on the game...then umm we had been getting help from someone called Big Ace... and he often helps me—he's the kinda guy that just knows everything and runs all mods and stuff and then he's just really game-like. He's had everything automatized—I also have that now but in the beginning, he helped me with stuff if I didn't know how to do it... He was really nice and I could add him to my island...

This situation seemed to offer a classic example of scaffolding, where a mentor and a novice co-created learning and development together within the zone of proximal development (i.e., within the confines of what, in this case, Antonio might achieve individually and the higher level of potential development that they were able to reach together; see Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This situation resembles that of Kirsten and her chats with Oliver (in Thorne, 2003).

LeVelle and Levis (2014) point to another benefit of “social involvement” with speakers of the L2, arguing it provides “opportunities to notice how people talk, how they interact, the ways in which they package their words and gestures, and the sociolinguistically marked variants that evoke comfort in interactions” (p. 452). This became evident through the perception of the target community speakers’ language as more authentic and through the fact that the young users did indeed notice “how they talk.” In fact, Nina (age seven) pronounced the English words she would occasionally use to describe different YouTube videos (e.g., the names of characters, *Ramona*, or names of items, *pickaxe*), with the accent of the YouTuber (i.e., either American or British accent).

Strategies

In her study, Gillette (1994) found that effective learners employed several productive strategies in order to fulfill their goals of learning the language. Swain (2000) notes that “one might hypothesize that learners seek solutions to their linguistic difficulties when the social activity they are engaged in offers them an incentive to do so, and the means to do so” (p. 100). And, indeed, such is also the case for users in the wild. In the present study, language learning was not the primary goal. However, the significance of and interest in the activities prompted the users to employ various strategies in order to understand the language. Sometimes the children would use strategies for understanding the language of the activities, and sometimes language was used as a strategy for advancing, or simply participating, in an activity.

Musical.ly, an app used to create personal sing-along videos while simultaneously making gestures to match the words, was specifically mentioned as a medium where one could attend to and understand the language. Giving a tour of Musical.ly, Alvira said the following:

You need to listen to the lyrics and then find out what it means and then make gestures.

Also, when listening to music online, the younger girls occasionally added lyrics to help them understand the song. The most common strategies were guessing from the context (or inferencing), using an online translation tool, and asking family members (similar to strategies used by Turkish children as discussed in the study by Turgut & İrgin, 2009).

Inferencing was commonly used as a strategy to understand unknown words:

Sean: Well [outside as opposed to inside school] they don't say hello that means hi that they don't like say in the games. There they just say it and then it's up to you to figure it out.

Karen: Then sometimes there are some things that you don't quite understand but if you then understand other things then it's easier to understand it when you see the connection between things.

Nina (using the context of her first language): If I cannot understand it, I try to remember something in Danish and then see if I will then know what it is and stuff like that.

As noted, Gillette (1994) found that inferencing was only employed by her effective learners who were motivated by higher cognitive motives for language learning. Evidently, children as young as seven (Nina)

likewise employed such strategies, creating for themselves affordances for language learning. Apart from the importance of the children's motivation for understanding the language, the multimodal nature of the activities was undoubtedly helpful. Previous research suggests that multimodal cues offer important information in the deciphering of unknown words (Elley, 1989; for the importance of multimodality for language development, also see Ortega, 2015).

Many children also used Google Translate for online translation:

Antonio: And then I can also for example if someone writes to me: “No you have to wait for a while”, in the beginning I did not know what “wait” was in English and then they said it and I thought what kind of word is that? And then I went to Google translate and then I found out that something is called patience or something like that.

Interestingly, Gillette (1994) found that her ineffective learners relied solely on dictionary use for unknown vocabulary, with little success. She argues that this might have been due to the analytical rather than functional nature of their dictionary use where words were merely looked up and not incorporated into meaningful use. As is evident from Antonio's example, his type of dictionary use was functional. A key function was to provide pragmatic knowledge which was called for by the social context. The use was highly meaningful as the knowledge was needed for Antonio's participation in the gaming team (i.e., he seemed to be driven by a social motive).

Even if they found Google Translate useful, some children also used *Google translate* as a derogatory term, indicating awareness that use of this tool also required a certain amount of critical sense. As a positive consequence, this tool may also draw attention to meta- knowledge about language and language use, causing the users to reflect on the language (Swain, 2000).

The above engagements with English are examples of the goal-oriented nature of language use, be it through incorporating words and phrases into songs to fit gestures, through inferencing words and trying to understand the bigger picture, or through looking up words to understand a personal message. These uses were all functional and personally meaningful. Thus, keeping with the findings of McCafferty et al. (2001), they seem potentially beneficial for the retention of lexical items (i.e., they all serve as important lexical items for goal-directed behavior).

The children also used strategies, involving English, for advancing in their activities. Thus, some children wrote in English when they searched the web for information. Antonio, for example, often searched the web for game-related information:

And then there's this grill and stuff and then you have to use gasoline for it. Initially I didn't know how to make gasoline—it didn't say anywhere and not many knew kind of, well, Thomas [friend] didn't know, my big brother didn't know and then I went to YouTube to search “How to make benzin” ... umm “gasoline” and then I figured it out like that.

Karl also writes English in Minecraft to make so-called command blocks, enabling him to build bigger structures faster and offering him the possibility to teleport and heal. The children were thus goal-oriented in their use of opportunities to listen to and write English, providing the possibility to engage with authentic English and, for some, the possibility to produce English language through writing.

In sum, higher cognitive motives for engaging with the English language—making it a sub in goal-directed engagement with the activities goal (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007)—was salient in the data and led the children to many affordances for language learning. However, as discussed below, a few children were driven by lower cognitive motives.

Lower Cognitive Motives

Not all children were equally motivated to engage with the L2. Niels, for example, expressed annoyance that the FIFA commentary was in English: “I wish you could switch to Danish.” He primarily sought out Danish YouTubers. It seemed that he felt no positive identification with the L2 speakers but, rather,

tolerated the English language, as it was vital for engagement in the activities. Similarly, Johanne was less enthusiastic about the English language and did not purposefully seek out English-language content.

This type of motivation for using English seemed to be a lower cognitive type, where the children, as in the examples of ineffective learners by Gillette (1994), seemed to use English out of necessity only. Such engagement inevitably led to fewer affordances for language learning (cf. van Lier, 2000), which was also evident in their engagement with English.

In general, Johanne, Katharina, and Niels would ignore unknown vocabulary. Niels stated that he would try to understand when it was necessary for engagement in the activity:

Well, in PES I have to read some of it or it becomes too difficult. I can't just be pressing buttons.

When Katharina faced unknown vocabulary, she stated, “I go back and forth. I don’t like it when they’re just talking forever. Then I’ll just forward it to when there’s like some action going on.” Thus, it seemed that Katharina would ignore the meaning of the vocabulary rather than try to infer it.

Many children mentioned that they asked friends’ and family members’ help in understanding unknown words. Niels would occasionally ask his family members for help with song lyrics: “It is actually quite annoying sometimes if it’s a good song... If your parents know, you can ask them, but often they don’t.” This example highlights the important fact that contextual factors were very important for expanding or limiting language learning opportunities and that motives and individual agency are not independent factors (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Norton, 2013; Pavlenko, 2002). As Nardi (1996) argues, context is not just “out there” (1996, p. 38). Rather, it is a combination of all of the factors in the activity system.³

Interestingly, the findings also showed that, for some, engagement with English in school was driven by lower cognitive motives carrying little personal significance. Ferdinand drew a very sharp distinction between engagement with English in the wild and English in school:

For example, these, all these games [outside school], there they are English games, in English, and it is like both where we learn some English and where it is fun for us instead of sitting and looking in like a book. For example, once we spent four English lessons on one page. And it was like really boring for all of us. We thought it was so boring!

Some of the children—like Kirsten in Thorne’s (2003) study—seemed to benefit particularly from the social and playful, rather than the educational, nature of engagement with English in the wild. And, like Kirsten, they seemed to think that English outside school was generally more authentic (see also Henry & Cliffordson, 2015; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016).

Limitations

Given the fluctuating nature of motivation, longitudinal studies would be needed to obtain more comprehensive knowledge on children’s motives (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Nardi, 1996). Furthermore, incorporating more data types, such as observational studies, would also be advisable. However, the findings may offer insights into a highly relevant activity system and may provide a starting point from which further research ideas can be developed.

Suggestions for Further Research

Despite a growing interest in language learning in the wild, still only few studies have investigated young users’ (7–11 years old or younger) extramural language learning. More research in general, quantitative as well as qualitative, on this group of users is needed. Qualitative emic studies, with their potential to enrich our understanding of the digital L2 lives of young children from an insider perspective, would significantly contribute to the field (Ushioda, 2008). Such studies are particularly relevant because of their ability to provide detailed knowledge of the specific activities that children engage in as well as the nature of the engagement (i.e., specific motives and actions). This, in turn, is able to inform our theorizing on language learning in the wild. To a significantly large group of young children, the opportunities to engage with

digital media mediated in English are abundant. Much more knowledge on their engagement with the potential affordances of these spaces is called for in order to describe and understand a societal phenomenon that is markedly different than that of generations not far removed in time. Likewise, limited access to the digital spaces, or limited engagement with their potential affordances, may help uncover socially structured inequalities and the implications thereof (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Norton, 2013). Furthermore, with the findings of the present study tentatively suggesting a gap in motivation between engagement with English in and outside school (for similar findings in older learners, see Henry, 2014), more research is needed on specifics of engagement with English in both activity systems. Such research would help uncover the causes of the different levels of motivation. For example, longitudinal ethnographic studies on young children's engagement in different activity systems, such as studies comparing motives for, and actual engagement with English in and outside school by the same group of learners, would be highly important to further expand on and elaborate the findings of the present study.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The present study explored which motives children were driven by in their use of English and how the children engaged with the L2. The study found that, for the most part, the children were motivated by social and higher cognitive motives. Through these motives, the children engaged with language-learning affordances in a goal-directed manner. Through their motivation, some actively engaged with English by writing (chats, comment blocks, comments on social media), reading (online information, chats, social media), and listening (songs, games, social media, YouTube videos, etc.). The study also found that some children were driven by lower cognitive motives in their engagement with English, lending fewer affordances for learning. They thus engaged with the language in a way that would merely enable them to get by. Interestingly, some children with higher cognitive motives for engagement with English in the wild had lower cognitive motives for engagement with English in school and found school-English to be less authentic.

In sum, this study highlights the importance of investigating users' specific engagement with language and not assuming that frequency of exposure is the sole variable accountable for language learning. As van Lier (2000) notes, users' needs and wants are crucial in determining learner agency, investment, and, by extension, learning outcomes. This study also highlights the importance for teachers to recognize that children bring to school different motives and different experiences with English (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). First and foremost, they need to acknowledge their students as people rather than just learners (Ushioda, 2011).

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Notes

1. *User*, rather than the traditional term *learner*, is used as individuals engaging in activities in the wild most likely identify as users rather than learners of language (cf., Sockett, 2014).
2. Engagement with English in the wild is also referred to as *extramural English engagement* (a term coined by Sundqvist (for details, see Sundqvist, 2009) and that is also employed in the present paper).
3. Importantly, one reviewer raised the question of whether this type of engagement and the limited use of strategies result from a lack of abilities rather than lower cognitive motives. That is, perhaps these children lacked knowledge of appropriate strategies or how to use them. In turn, one may speculate that encounters with English may lead to frustrations rather than just having fun, reinforcing the negative

perception of English.

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