

Is Out-of-Class Learning More Effective?

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Abstract

This essay examines the effectiveness of out-of-class learning in language learning, exploring the benefits and limitations of learning beyond the classroom and its impact on learners' language proficiency and motivation. Out-of-class settings offer personalized learning experiences and access to resources, motivating learners and fostering connections with the target language and culture. However, it lacks systematic study and immediate corrective feedback. The research concludes that a healthy learning ecology requires a balance between formal classroom-based instruction and out-of-class learning, with both complementing and reinforcing each other to maximize language learning outcomes. As such, to enhance efficiency and create a sustainable learning environment, teachers and learners should play a role in bridging the two learning contexts.

Keywords

Out-of-class learning; Classroom-based instruction; Learning ecology; Language proficiency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Languages can be learned not only in language classrooms but in any place and at any time (Hyland, 2004). Out-of-class learning refers to “any form of learning that takes place outside the classroom and involves self-directed naturalistic learning or self-instruction naturalistic learning.”(Benson, 2013, p.64). This learning context has been proven to be a contributing factor in language gains. Black (2006), for example, conducted a case study in which informal Japanese English learners, despite their lack of interest in English as a school subject, experienced an enormous improvement in their target language due to their passion for American pop-culture. Similarly, Benson and Chik (2010) reported on several successful L2 learners in Hong Kong who ascribed their high-level English proficiency to their frequent interaction with native speakers in the online virtual community. It is true that out-of-class learning activities may help learners yield positive learning outcomes to some extent. According to Lighbown and Spada(2013), most people are convinced informal out-of-class learning is more effective than formal classroom-based instruction. From my point of view, this belief can hardly be held true. Although out-of-class learning has its unique advantages, there are some essential contributions that only instructional settings can provide. Successful language learners are supposed to capitalize on the learning experience both inside and outside language classrooms. The purpose of this study is to clarify the common misconception mentioned above by examining both strengths and limitations of out-of-class learning, in an effort to present a deeper insight into both settings for learning.

2. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OUT-OF-CLASS LEARNING

The suggestion seems to make sense when considering the complex interaction between individual differences and learning environments. Learning (and relative success) is an outcome of the complex interaction between learning context and learner characteristics (Robinson, 2002). As such, it is advisable for teachers to find the optimal fit between person (L2 learner) and situation (learner condition) in L2 classroom (Robinson, 2002). In reality, however, it is impractical, or even impossible for teachers to customize instruction to suit the abilities or preferences of each one (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). From this way of thinking, out-of-class settings, which provide learners with more freedom to learn according to their personal preferences and characteristics, are likely to fill this gap.

Nevertheless, not all out-of-class experiences contribute equally to language gains (Lai & Zhu & Gong, 2015). In his study, Sundqvist (2011) discovered that, among the informal learning activities that Swedish English language learners participate in, activities that demanded the learners "to depend heavily on their language skills," including reading newspapers/magazines, reading books, surfing the Internet are stronger indicators of learners' vocabulary size and oral proficiency level than activities such as watching films, listening to music, etc. This is to say that the effectiveness of out-of-class learning depends largely on different categories of activities learners engage in.

On top of that, out-of-class learning is susceptible to the influence of internal and external factors. Without adequate guidance and supervision, it is less likely for learners to learn autonomously and effectively. For instance, in Chusanachoti's (2009) study, the participant Benya reported her tendency to engage in receptive English activities instead of productive ones, due to her lack of confidence. She was shy and could not articulate well so most of the time she refrains from speaking with others in English. In addition to that participants in Hyland's (2004) research showed a tendency to focus on private instead of face-to-face "public" activities, including chatting with people in shops, talking over the phone, speaking English with friends. The reasons for their avoidance involved the negative social connotations of using English in their community. My personal experience is mostly in line with that of Benya. Although I am aware that practicing English with native speakers could make a profound difference in English communication skills, I am too shy to speak with others in English. To some degree, my introverted personality limits my learning opportunities out of class, to the disadvantage of the development of my oral English.

As what has been ascertained, It is unjustifiable to jump to the conclusion that informal out-of-class learning is more efficient than in-class learning, given that "learning on the streets" might be subject to a number of uncertain factors, which includes the types of activities learners participate in, and other internal and external factors, etc. To further understand out-of-class learning settings, the paper is designed to bring to light its benefits and limitations.

3. THE BENEFITS OF OUT-OF-CLASS LEARNING

Without the restriction of brick-and-mortar classrooms, learners are able to take full advantage of an extensive variety of resources and venues to improve their language proficiency. Primary resources presumably deployed in the virtual arena contain movies, songs, and TV shows. Blogs, Facebook, mobile device apps, and online chatting are other resources that may be used in the virtual arena. The resources which tend to be used in the physical arena include studying abroad, traveling experiences, and language-related events on campus (Lai, 2014). Kuppens (2010) reported on Flemish sixth-grade learners. The participants who spent a large amount of time watching movies with subtitles showed a higher level of bilingual translation skills. Additionally, playing digital games could be positively correlated with L2 proficiency, particularly in terms of vocabulary knowledge as well as listening and reading comprehension

skills(Sundqvist, 2009). Personally, classroom-based instruction used to be the only approach for me to learn English in middle school. After going to college, classroom based instruction cannot meet my demand anymore, and then I began to learn English beyond the classroom. It turns out to be a spontaneous and fun method to acquire up-to-date learning resources which makes abundant authentic input available for me. For example, I have mastered a vast majority of colloquial vocabulary and the latest buzzwords through watching the recent American dramas. For me, learning English outside a classroom is a convenient and interesting way of learning practical knowledge, while formal instruction in textbooks seems less attractive.

Pursuing this further, intensive research has demonstrated that out-of-class learning helps learners maintain motivation in learning. Compared with the monotonous and tedious in-class experience, learning a language beyond classroom allows learners to choose their favorite ways of learning. For example, in Lai's (2014) study, his participant who is into Spanish songs suggested her strong desire to comprehend the lyrics of Spanish songs encourages herself to learn further about this language. For instance, I am a big fan of Tom Hiddleston. So most of the out-of-class learning resources I choose are from his movies or speeches. As I am particularly into his accent, I start to practice British pronunciation and imitate his speech. Learning process seems not that painstaking for me when I am watching my idol.

Last but not least, out-of-class learning enhances learners' connection with their target language as well as the target culture. In conventional classrooms, learners tend to feel separated from the real and natural language environment, while out-of-class learning tends to integrate learners into the authentic language context. Lai's(2014) study could be a good case in point. The participant in his study indicates that their experiences of communicating with foreign friends familiarize themselves with how the language is actually used. As an English learner, my trip to America gives me more access to practice English with native speakers in daily life, which is something in-class settings fail to offer. It gives me a strong sense of accomplishment because I feel that I am able to put what I've learned into practice by using English in an authentic language environment.

4. THE LIMITATIONS OF OUT-OF-CLASS LEARNING

Be that as it may, learning beyond the classroom is not without its defects. Out-of-class learning will never compensate for the formal learning experience and frequent feedback on errors served by in-class learning(Lai, 2014).

First, the informal nature of out-of-class learning distracts learners from studying their second language in a formal and systematic manner. Lai's study(2014) shows that most participants engage in out-of-class activities that took up a limited amount of time, such as watching 20-minute TV series, and chatting with friends for a short period of time, among others. This is because they assume that they fail to fix their attention on studying after class. Compared with these easy and light activities, it normally demands long periods of concentration to learn the basics of the language(i.e. vocabulary, grammar, introduction to the target culture). With teachers' guidance, language classes can keep them attentive and persistent in learning the language. One participant in Lai's(2014) study reports that taking language classes suits her better. She has attempted to study Spanish via self-study but gave it up soon because of all kinds of distractions. I totally concur with this viewpoint, because outside the classroom environment, I am easily distracted when reading long paragraphs and passages of grammar books through self-study. Conversely, in the classroom, teachers' formal instruction enables me to focus on the knowledge and study one step at a time.

Second, learners are less likely to receive immediate correction after class. As what is argued by Oliver and Mackey(2003), in the process of learning a language, learners will inevitably make errors. These errors are usually neglected in natural acquisition settings, while corrective

feedback is generally provided in classroom settings. Lai's(2014) study found that the out-of-class learning activities his participants engaged in are meaning-focused, in the absence of appropriate guidance for what is right or wrong. I learn my second language in China, where the instruction places a high value on language accuracy. Teachers always give us suggestions or corrections for our errors in speaking or writing. When I start to engage in more meaning-focused activities after class. Despite its multiple advantages, I still feel quite uncertain because I am not sure whether I am learning on the right track without teachers' guidance.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

After discussing the benefits and limitations of out-of-class learning, it is safe to conclude that learning beyond the classroom is not necessarily more effective than in-class learning. In spite of its motivational and social function, out-of-class learning is less likely to provide learners with systematic study and sufficient corrective feedback. Thus, formal instruction can by no means be replaced by out-of-class learning. In fact, the learning environment can be compared to an ecology that comprises diverse interdependent and dynamic elements (Brown, 2000). A healthy and sustainable learning ecology depends on numerous constituents with unique strengths that work together in a complementary manner. Instructional and natural settings are both significant components of learning ecology(Siemens, 2003).

It is simply unwise to argue which one is better than the other. On the one hand, out-of-class learning serves a broad range of beneficial functions: creating more learning opportunities, sustaining their motivation to learn, and drawing learners closer to their target language and culture. On the other hand, formal classroom-based instruction mainly serves cognitive and meta-cognitive functions in language learning, providing students with a formal and systematic way of learning language and appropriate corrective feedback. Both elements, formal and informal, complement and reinforce each other to sustain the adaptability and well-being of a learning ecology. Accordingly, in a bid to enhance the efficiency of learning a second language, it is advisable for both learners to capitalize on both learning contexts.

To bridge their experience inside and outside the language classrooms, both language teachers and language learners have a crucial role to play. Teachers are suggested to incorporate motivational and attractive out-of-class learning experiences into formal and academic instruction, to arouse learners' learning interest, help them persevere in learning, and enliven the formal in-class learning. It is also suggested that they could give assignments involving the use of various resources outside the class to extend learning content in class to out-of-class venues. Students could also make up for the perceived shortfalls of their formal and passive in-class learning by constructing fun and relaxing out-of-class learning experiences.

To conclude, both informal and formal settings possess their own virtues and imperfections that complement each other. It is unwise to separate one learning context from another. Out-of-class learning with its social and motivational functions in addition to in-class learning which affords the cognitive and meta-cognitive functions complete and reinforce each other, contributing to a healthy and sustainable learning ecology(Hyland, 2004). To maximize learning outcomes, both teachers and learners play a vital role in bridging the two learning experiences

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