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RESEARCH PAPER

“Watching video is maybe just like a hobby”: A case study of video streaming for informal, self-directed foreign language learning

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Abstract

Video streaming is a common social practice in modern society, especially among today’s youth. Many people are also using these services as a resource for informal learning. However, few studies have examined the use of video streaming for self-directed foreign language (FL) learning beyond the classroom. The present study addresses this research gap, it explores why language learners use video streaming to view FL content and examines how this digital literacy practice affects FL learning. A case study design was adopted, and data collected from 12 Japanese university students was analysed. Data was gathered from multiple sources including reflective writing reports, photo screenshots, and semi-structured interviews. Reflective thematic analysis of the data indicated that the language learners’ video streamed FL content for two reasons, either

to purposefully study the FL or primarily for reasons not directly connected to language learning, i.e., for entertainment or interest-based purposes. Video streaming contributed to the learners' FL development in three ways: (i) it supported language learner autonomy; (ii) it enhanced learner motivation; and (iii) it increased intercultural awareness. These results bolster the limited research on FL video streaming beyond the classroom and highlight the affordances of this digital resource for self-directed language learning.

Keywords

Informal language learning; literacy practice; self-directed learning; video streaming; digital wilds; foreign language learning

1. Introduction

Since the advent of YouTube in 2005, video streaming has gradually become an everyday part of people's lives. In 2021, 81% of American adults said they used YouTube to watch online video (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Usage of YouTube is even greater among teenagers; 95% of American teens watch content over the streaming service, with approximately one in five of them stating that they use YouTube "almost consistently" (Vogels et al., 2022, p. 4). The growing popularity of video streaming can also be seen in other countries around the world. For instance, according to survey research by Statista (2022), subscription video streaming usage in Japan has increased significantly since 2017, going from 9.6% in that year to 28.9% in 2022. Similar to the U.S., the percentage of young people in Japan who watch YouTube is also very high, with over 97% of Japanese teenagers stating that they use the video streaming service (Statista, 2021).

Given the ubiquity of video streaming, people are increasingly turning to these services, particularly YouTube, as a resource for informal learning (Lange, 2019). According to Lange, informal learning takes place in out-of-school contexts and is not influenced by an authority figure. While informal learning includes planned behaviour and the purposeful act of learning, it also encompasses incidental learning that occurs through different activities. That is, informal learning can be unintentional and a by-product of another activity such as work, communication, or recreation. Although there have been several studies which have examined the impact of video streaming on in-class language learning (e.g., Alm, 2021), fewer studies have investigated video streaming for self-directed, out-of-class FL learning. Those that have studied video streaming in this context have focused on a specific type of service. Nishioka (2023) and Wang and Chen (2019) focused on out-of-class second language (L2) learning via YouTube, while Dizon's (2021) work has looked at learners' subscription video streaming-related practices in a FL. Thus, there is a need to explore how learners utilise the wide range of video streaming services that are available to them for informal FL learning beyond the classroom. Considering these gaps in the literature, the following research questions were addressed in this study:

- 1) Why do foreign language learners use video streaming for informal language learning?
- 2) How does the practice of video streaming contribute to foreign language learning?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Technology-mediated informal language learning

One of the most widely used explanatory frameworks for understanding technology-mediated informal language learning is Benson's (2011) four dimensions of language learning beyond the classroom, which is an umbrella term that describes language learning (digital and non-digital) that occurs outside of formal contexts. The four

dimensions in the framework are: location, formality, pedagogy, and locus of control. Although Benson's framework is useful in understanding FL learning in out-of-class settings, it does not take into account the extent to which purposeful language learning is involved. Many learners are involved in activities in which the primary goal is not directly connected to language learning (e.g., social media, gaming), yet they are able to incidentally gain valuable knowledge about FL culture and language. This is referred to as language learning in the digital wilds (Sauro & Zourou, 2019). Sauro and Zourou (2019) state that the digital wilds involve "learning [that] does not take place within a digital context or community with a primary goal of language teaching and learning" (p. 2). This key difference separates the digital wilds from another related concept in the field of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), namely, informal digital learning of English (IDLE), as this form of learning includes activities that involve intentional language learning. This is an important distinction to make, as some learners may not be consciously aware that they are gaining language and cultural knowledge by using digital technologies and resources. The incidental nature of the digital wilds is exemplified by this participant quote in Murray et al. (2022) which focuses on the potential of Netflix and Spotify as language-learning resources:

Both of these apps are ones I use on a daily basis but never realized the never-ending language learning possibilities of [them] such as watching movies in other languages with English subtitles or watching them in English or other languages with Spanish or any other subtitles (p. 88).

Literature on IDLE and the digital wilds reveals several key affordances of technology-mediated informal FL learning. In a scoping review of 30 IDLE studies, Soyoo et al. (2023) found that research in this area tended to focus on three dimensions or stages of CALL: the linguistic dimension, the affective and cultural dimension, and the agency and digital literacies dimension. In other words, IDLE has the potential to enhance individualistic language learning (the linguistic dimension), promote non-linguistic factors related to FL learning (the affective and cultural dimension), and promote learner autonomy (the agency and digital literacies dimension). In a systematic review of the digital wilds which included 13 studies, Dizon (2023) identified five affordances of incidental FL learning through digital technologies and resources: multimodality, situated learning, authenticity, interaction, and feedback. These two systematic review studies on technology-mediated informal FL learning highlight the benefits of informal FL learning beyond the classroom.

2.2. Informal language learning through video streaming

As stated previously, there is a paucity of research concerning self-directed FL video streaming in out-of-class contexts. One exception is a survey-based study involving Japanese university students to better understand their practices and views towards video streaming for informal language learning (Dizon, 2021). Based on the results of a survey and interviews, the researcher concluded that Japanese university students had favorable perceptions toward video streaming for out-of-class language learning. All eight of the Likert-type scale items on the survey had mean values closer to agree than disagree. A content analysis of the open-ended survey data revealed that the participants believed subscription video streaming services enhanced FL skill development, made FL learning more enjoyable, and provided opportunities to learn about foreign culture.

While Dizon's (2021) work has examined subscription video streaming services, Wang and Chen (2019) investigated L2 learners' experiences of and attitudes to watching L2 English-learning videos on YouTube. Results from the study showed that the Taiwanese learners watched these YouTube videos for three main reasons: to expand their L2 learning resources, to enhance their motivation to study English, and to obtain more cultural knowledge. Lastly, although the participants believed watching YouTube was a more enjoyable and flexible L2 learning method than classroom-based learning, they were more skeptical of video streaming as a means to improve L2 English ability.

Another study which investigated the use of YouTube for informal FL learning is Nishioka's (2023) in-depth case study of an L2 Korean learner in the Philippines. The study explored how the L2 Korean learner used digital resources, primarily YouTube, to study the FL.

Results from the study indicated that the L2 Korean learner used several strategies to find resources that were relevant to her Korean-language studies, e.g., using keyword searches, watching videos recommended by other YouTubers, watching videos suggested by YouTube, and following lesson plans created by YouTubers. Findings from this study demonstrate that FL learners can use YouTube to personalise their learning experiences to meet their own language learning needs and goals.

The literature outlined above highlights how video streaming has been used to support FL development. However, there are still some gaps to be addressed. While social media, gaming, mobile devices, and the general use of digital technologies have been extensively studied, fewer studies have examined video streaming from an out-of-class, informal FL learning perspective. Both Soyoo et al.'s (2023) scoping review of IDLE and Dizon's (2023) systematic review included only one video streaming-related study. Considering that video streaming is one of the most common digital practices among today's youth, it is critical to gain a better understanding of how self-directed language learners use these digital resources to learn more about FLs and foreign cultures. The studies that have been conducted on video streaming in a self-directed, informal FL learning context (Dizon, 2021; Nishioka, 2023; Wang & Chen, 2019) have largely relied on survey and/or interview data. Thus, other methods of data collection are needed to obtain a more complete picture of video streaming's influence on self-directed language learning.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

A case study research design was utilised to explore the out-of-class use of video streaming for informal FL learning. Each case consisted of a Japanese university student who regularly engaged in the practice of video streaming in a FL. I decided to use a multiple-case study design as "the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall multiple-case study is therefore regarded as being more robust" (Yin, 2018, p. 54). By adopting a multiple-case study, I hoped to better encapsulate the diversity of practices that FL learners employ when video streaming in out-of-class contexts as well as highlight patterns among their video streaming behaviours. Multiple sources of data were collected for the present case study, namely, reflective writing data, learner-generated photo data, and interview data.

3.2. Participants

This study took place in an out-of-school context with EFL students from a private Japanese university. All the participants spoke Japanese as a first language (L1) and were college-aged adults ranging from 18 to 21 years of age. The students belonged to the Foreign Studies Department, and as a result, majored in various FLs including English, French, Chinese, and Korean (see Table 1 for a breakdown of the participants' profiles). I previously taught the students during the spring 2021 semester in either an English listening course or an English writing course. The study was conducted virtually during the summer vacation period in August and September of 2021. Specifically, I used online tools to collect reflective writing and photo data and conducted Zoom interviews with each participant.

Table 1

Learner profiles (NB: All participant names are pseudonyms).

Name	Age	Foreign languages studied (years studied)	Video streaming services used	Types of foreign language content viewed
Lisa	21	English (6)	Netflix, YouTube	English movies, English-language learning videos, English-language music videos, and Korean dramas
Mei	19	English (6), Korean (1), Chinese (0.5)	AbemaTV, YouTube	English-language learning videos, English-language prank videos, eSports competitions in English and Chinese, Korean cosmetics videos, Korean dramas
Hina	20	English (8), Italian (2)	Amazon Prime Video, YouTube	English-language movies, K-pop music videos, Korean variety shows
Daiki	19	English (10), French (2)	Amazon Prime Video, YouTube	English-language movies, English-language YouTubers, French movies
Aina	18	English (6), Korean (1)	Amazon Prime Video, YouTube	English-language movies, English-language YouTubers, French movies
Yuka	19	English (6), Chinese (2)	Netflix, YouTube	Chinese dramas, Chinese-language music videos, Chinese movies, English-language dramas, English-language movies, English-language music videos, Korean dramas, K-pop music videos
Ayano	18	English (10), Chinese (1)	Netflix, YouTube	Chinese dramas, English-language cooking shows, English-language dramas, K-pop music videos
Shota	19	English (10), Spanish (2)	U-Next, YouTube	English-language movies, English-language music videos, Spanish-language music videos

Saya	19	English (9), Korean (2)	Amazon Prime, Netflix, YouTube	K-pop music videos, Korean dramas, Korean movies
Mizuki	19	English (6)	YouTube	English-language music videos
Mako	19	English (6), Korean (2), Chinese (2)	Netflix, YouTube	Chinese music idol auditions, English- language movies, K-pop music videos, Korean movies
Mao	20	English (3) Chinese (17)	U-Next, YouTube	Chinese dramas, Chinese music videos, English-language movies, English- language TV shows

3.3. Data collection

Over a period of approximately six weeks in summer 2021, three forms of data were collected for the study: 1) reflective writing data, 2) learner-generated photo data, and 3) interview data. Samples of reflective writing were collected to gain a preliminary understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions towards out-of-class video streaming in a FL. I also asked the participants to take photo screenshots using their mobile devices and/or computers of the behaviours they engaged in when video streaming FL content. This constituted the learner-generated photo data. Specifically, the participants were asked to take video streaming screenshots each week of anything that they thought was interesting or meaningful as it relates to FL and foreign culture. As noted by Yi et al. (2022), the use of photovoice allows researchers to paint a more complete picture of participants' digital practices. The final source of data came from semi-structured interviews that were conducted via Zoom. The interviews were arranged into three parts. The first part consisted of demographic questions about each participant's background. The second part featured questions about their FL video streaming-related practices and perceptions. The final part of the interview was devoted to photovoice, i.e., the participants shared 10 to 15 screenshots that best represented their FL video streaming-related behaviours, and they described how these activities contributed to the language learning process.

3.4. Data analysis

I used reflective thematic analysis (TA) as the framework to analyse the reflecting writing and interview data. Although TA is often thought of as a single approach to qualitative analysis, Braun and Clarke (2021) note that in practice, TA is utilised in a variety of ways. Compared to more commonly utilised versions of TA, reflective TA is fully accepting of researcher subjectivity. In reflective TA, building consensus among a team of researchers is not only unnecessary, but undesirable. Because coding in reflective TA is open and organic, the use of a codebook or coding framework is not needed. Themes are considered the final outcome of the interpretive and reflexive analytical process. For these reasons, I chose to utilise this version of TA over reliability TA, codebook TA or other popular approaches to qualitative analysis (e.g., content analysis or grounded theory) that conceptualise researcher subjectivity as a potential issue rather than a resource for knowledge.

4. Results

4.1. RQ1: Why do foreign language learners use video streaming for informal language learning?

Based on my reflective TA, the participants fell into one of two groups regarding why they video streamed in a FL. Over half of the learners (n = 7) primarily took an intentional approach to language learning when viewing FL content. Some of these learners worked to improve specific aspects of their FL development such as pronunciation, grammar, or listening development, as shown in the quotes below.

I sometimes watch the YouTube channel of study English. One of the members is from United States and other two guys are Japanese. And they discuss the differences between the English grammars and Japanese grammars or like the difference between "a" and "the" so that is very useful for me studying English. (Lisa, interview)

I can learn intonation and pronunciation so foreign language video streaming is important. (Aina, interview)

I think it helps me with listening. I watch movies in English. I can learn native speakers' pronunciation and expressions, which I can use for listening questions in English examinations. (Shota, reflective report)

Others within this group utilised specific language learning strategies when viewing content, e.g., looking up unfamiliar words in the FL, thereby indicating their intention to purposefully study the FL.

I often take screenshots of words that interest me and look up their meanings. Thanks to that, I can understand a little bit of Korean now. I also watch a lot of Chinese programs these days. I think it is very useful for me because I look up Chinese words I don't understand or am curious about as soon as I see them. (Yuka, reflective report)

The FL video streaming activity of the remaining learners (n = 5) was rooted in their personal interests. That is, they enjoyed watching videos that connected with their interests or hobbies and did not take any intentional steps toward language learning beyond the act of viewing. For example, some of them only watched FL TV series, movies, and/or music videos. They did not view other content specifically related to language learning (i.e., language-teaching YouTubers). Other participants' video streaming practices within this group originated in fandom practices or activity in which "people gather to enthuse about their favourite celebrity figure, idol, musician, model, and TV show" (Malik & Haidar, 2020, p. 2). The excerpt below illustrates the typical rationale behind these learners' fandom-based video streaming.

I really enjoy being able to choose my favourite videos to watch. I like a Korean idol called SEVENTEEN and watch their videos often. There are so many videos of them that I never get tired of watching them every day. (Hina, reflective report)

4.2. RQ2: How does the practice of video streaming contribute to foreign language learning?

Three themes emerged from my reflective TA in terms of how the practice of video streaming impacted the participants' FL learning. The first theme I identified was learner autonomy. In other words, video streaming allowed the learners to take greater control of the FL learning process, thereby enabling them to choose materials that suited their ability levels, interests, and needs. In particular, several of the learners stated that video streaming allowed them to focus on aspects of language learning that were under-addressed or ignored in their formal language classes.

It's different because the university's native teachers teaches like how to write reports or discuss some very important things or topics. So, they don't usually teach their pronunciation or grammars. So, if I worried about my grammars or pronunciation...I can study from their [YouTube] content. (Lisa, interview)

I learn a lot from foreign dramas, movies, and TV shows because they are spoken in the native language of the country, not the one you learn in school. (Mako, interview)

I can learn what I am interested in, when I want, and as much as I want, unlike the classes I take at school. (Mei, reflective report)

I can learn how to express myself and how to pronounce things that I can't learn in language classes in Japan. (Daiki, reflective report)

The second theme that emerged from my reflective analysis was motivation. That is, the practice of video streaming motivated many of the learners to study the FL. Mei's case illustrated this best. Specifically, as noted in her interview, she had held a negative association toward English language learning due to her formal education in Japan, but this slowly changed due to video streaming.

I think English education in Japan teaches English not as communication tool, but as a study subject. So, I have bad image to speaking foreign language because most of Japanese people were very concerned about grammar and pronunciation [when] they are speaking English, just like when they take a test...So I thought as English like just subject, but watching video is maybe just like a hobby.

Besides Mei, several of the other learners noted how enjoyable it was to watch FL content through video streaming, in no small part because the content often related to their interests.

I think that watching your favorite videos or music is an effective way to improve your awareness and speed up the learning process, because it means you are doing something you like. (Mao, interview)

I mainly watched music videos of foreign artists. I enjoy watching them because they are not only cool but also easy to dance to, with many songs that are easy to get excited about. (Mizuki, reflective report)

Intercultural awareness was the final theme that I identified in relation to the influence of video streaming on FL learning. Video streaming exposed the learners to cultural differences and/or elements of foreign culture that they otherwise would not have known about.

I don't study Korean [in school] but I watch Korean videos...They sometimes in video them eating lunch or dinner...I understood food culture or table manner in Korea. (Hina, interview)

American people is strong...their personality. And wearing shoes in house. I'm really surprised. (Ayano, interview)

Korean boy is gentlemen...Korean girl rides car. Korean boy opens the door [for Korean women]. (Saya, interview)

5. Discussion

The first research question addressed the rationale behind the participants' FL video streaming. In this regard, two types of learners emerged from my analysis, one that primarily took an intentional approach to FL learning and another that took an incidental approach. That is, some of the learners took steps to purposefully study the FL through video streaming while others viewed FL content mainly for entertainment or interest purposes. These two profiles of language learners align with the technology-mediated informal language learning concepts of IDLE and the digital wilds. Although it may be difficult to create a strict boundary between these two types of learners when it comes to motive, my analysis indicates that there is a clear contrast between the participants' practices as it relates to FL video streaming.

These findings concerning the learners' motives to use video streaming differ somewhat from previous self-directed, informal FL learning research involving video streaming. That is, the participants in Nishioka (2023) and Wang and Chen (2019) all took a purposeful approach to studying a FL. In Nishioka (2023), the single participant was motivated to learn the Korean language via YouTube in order to work in South Korea, while in Wang and Chen (2019), the EFL students watched English-teaching YouTubers to complement the formal language instruction they received at university. In contrast, five of the learners in this research did not seek to intentionally study the FL through video streaming, but rather, used it primarily for entertainment and interest purposes. Thus, the results of the present study partially align with Nishioka (2023) and Wang and Chen (2019), in that some of the learners used it for intentional language learning, whereas the remaining learners in this study took an incidental approach to FL learning, much like previous literature on the digital wilds (e.g., Malik & Haider, 2020; Vazquez-Calvo et al., 2019).

The second research question focused on the practice of out-of-class video streaming and how it can influence FL development. The findings of the present study largely align with previous research on self-directed FL learning with video streaming in out-of-class settings. Specifically, much like Dizon (2021) and Wang and Chen (2019), this study reinforces the notion that informal FL learning through video streaming can have a positive influence on students' FL motivation and their access to cultural knowledge. In addition, similar to Nishioka (2023), the results highlight the role that video streaming can play in enhancing FL learners' capacity to obtain language materials that suit their specific interests and needs, thereby enhancing learner autonomy.

These findings related to RQ2 also support previous studies in the greater domains of IDLE and the digital wilds. That is, much like the results found in this study, the systematic reviews by Soyoo et al. (2023) of IDLE, and Dizon (2023) of the digital wilds, show that technology-mediated informal FL learning affords several key benefits for language learning, particularly when it comes to cultural awareness and learner agency. This is significant as FL learning in out-of-class settings will only continue to grow due to the quantity and diversity of digital resources available to language learners. Thus, from a pedagogical perspective, it is important for teachers to create links between learners' informal digital practices and formal language teaching practices in the classroom. This would not only bridge the gap between these two differing contexts, but also serve to validate the backgrounds and identities of learners (Moll, 2019).

6. Conclusion

The ubiquity of video streaming has made the digital practice an integral part of students' everyday lives. In turn, many language learners are now using these services as a resource for informal FL learning. Yet, research on FL video streaming in self-directed, out-of-class contexts is scarce. Therefore, this study sought to address this research gap by investigating why language learners use this digital resource in the context of FL learning and how this literacy practice contributes to FL development. It was found that the participants video streamed in a FL for two reasons, to purposefully study the FL or mainly for purposes not related to language learning (i.e., entertainment or interest-based viewing). Video streaming contributed to the learners' FL learning in three ways. Specifically, the digital practice promoted learner autonomy, enhanced motivation to study the FL, and exposed them to cultural knowledge. These findings are significant as they provide insight into the ways learners utilise the variety of video streaming resources available to them for informal FL learning, which contrasts with previous video streaming research that focused solely on either YouTube or subscription video streaming.

In light of the study's findings, some pedagogical implications emerge. First, as mentioned previously, teachers should incorporate learners' informal digital practices within the formal language classroom. In the context of video streaming, videos from YouTube or a subscription video streaming service could be shown in class. In addition to teacher-selected videos, students should also be given a voice when it comes to selection. In that way, learners can still maintain a sense of agency within the classroom environment. However, due to the authentic nature of technology-mediated informal FL learning,

learners may have difficulty understanding videos in a FL. Thus, steps should be taken to reduce learners' cognitive load, e.g., introducing key vocabulary prior to viewing, playing video at a reduced speed, and/or showing materials multiple times to aid comprehension. Moreover, teachers can encourage language learners to incorporate the FL in the digital practices they are already engaged in outside of class, such as video streaming. Language learners may consume video streaming content on a regular basis, but they may only watch videos in their L1. Thus, by linking the FL with learners' existing video streaming practices, teachers can help learners achieve a key language learning goal: "help[ing] students engage in their own IDLE activities independently and continuously without any intervention from the teacher" (Lee, 2022, p. 88).

This study has some limitations. Given that the research focused on a very specific context, the video streaming-related practices of the participants may not be representative of other self-directed language learners who video stream in a FL. As a result, it would be worthwhile to recruit participants of varying ages and cultural backgrounds in order to better understand how video streaming services are used for informal FL learning in beyond the class settings. Additionally, the focus of this research was wide in scope, in that it provided a broad overview of the learners' video streaming practices. Consequently, a future study could present a more detailed analysis of the specific behaviours of learners when video streaming FL content.

Ethical statement

All participants provided written informed consent to use their data. The author has no competing or conflicting interests to declare.

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