

Rewilding language learning resources in higher education: vlogs and vlogging

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Introduction

One of the issues in the teaching of English to students of other disciplines in higher education around the world today is the learners' extensive informal practices in English, such as gaming, watching videos and listening to music. The way in which these activities could and should influence English teaching will be the main focus of this paper. The notion of rewilding may be a helpful image to encapsulate the need for the rich variety of English language practices to make their way into the classroom, promoting the diversity of the learning ecology. Examples will be taken from student work and responses to surveys as part of an experimental class which placed vloggers (YouTube content creators) and vlogging (creating videos in a similar style) at the centre of the learning process. This class was entitled "Bring your own English" (BYOE) and was offered to students at Université Paris Cité in the second semester of the 2023-24 academic year. We will conclude by considering whether it is the materials themselves which are the most important element in such a rewilding process or the pedagogies which accompany them.

When discussing informal practices and informal learning, it is perhaps helpful to begin by defining more clearly what one may have in mind when using these terms. In the education science context, Schugurensky (2007) has helpfully divided informal learning into three processes distinguished by their relationship with intent and awareness. He considers that informal practices are best described as "self-directed learning" when they are intentional and when the learner is aware of their impact. Such learning might include using video viewing as an opportunity to write down and learn new vocabulary. Informal practices may be described as "incidental acquisition" when they are not carried out with the intention of learning, but when the learner is aware that learning is taking place. Examples of this type of learning would include learners watching videos purely for leisure purposes but noticing later, in English class for example, that their level of oral comprehension had improved. Finally, when learning is neither intentional nor within the scope of awareness of the learner, Schugurensky describes the process as "socialization". One might think of the development of a regional accent after living in a certain area for a number of years as an example of such learning. In the context of this paper, it is the second of these types of learning which is of

greatest interest because it involves amounts of exposure to the target language on the order of hundreds of hours per year (Sockett 2014), and has the potential to interact with more formal types of learning, since the learner is aware of what is happening.

The notion of rewilding in the title of this paper relates to ecological approaches to language learning, in which principles from the natural sciences are brought to bear on language learning. Soulé and Noss (1998) were amongst the first to point out that rewilding involves reintroducing fauna and flora to ecologies that have lost biodiversity through human habitation, cultivation and urbanization. Similarly language teachers may wish to consider whether current course contents reflect the real world biodiversity of the innumerable English-language gaming, networking, viewing, vlogging, listening and reading activities which occupy the leisure hours of so many students in the 21st century. Thorne, Hillerman and Jakonen (2021), in their work on rewilding language education, have similarly called for the ecological alignment of domesticated instructional spaces vis-à-vis the heterogeneity, complexity, and unpredictability of interaction in the wild. It is indeed the case that while the language learner of the last century may only have known of the natural environment of the target language through a dusty textbook, today the wild is only a click away.

Teachers may be drawn to at least four potential responses to the reality and extent of students' online informal practices. Firstly one might consider that formal and informal learning are separate entities and that little is to be learned from childish games, inane pop songs and amateur videos. In this perspective, an ecological view of language learning is of little importance since the focus of learning is the classroom syllabus and the expertise of the teacher to impart knowledge. Secondly, a reasonable response might be to observe that most informal practice is made up of listening comprehension (Sockett, 2014). Indeed in terms of hours, research has shown that the majority of informal practices involve watching vlogs, series or movies or listening to the lyrics of songs in English. Thus, a complementary approach might be to focus on oral expression in class, since this is the least frequently practiced informal activity. Thirdly, teachers might view the wild as an area to be tamed, and begin prescribing activities for learners to do outside the classroom. While this would be a helpful strategy in the context of what Schugurensky (2007) called self-directed learning, it fails to take into consideration the times when learners are playing, viewing and listening precisely to get away from the pressures of being a student and having a lot of homework. A fourth perspective, which we will develop further in this paper, would involve allowing the practices of the wild into the classroom in order to help students build the relevant skills for a lifetime of doing them outside the classroom. In this context, it is not the contents themselves which play a key role, but the awareness raising and strategy development which may help students to learn a little every day from the following fifty years of exposure to English language materials.

Examples from Université Paris Cité

In order to illustrate this approach, data will be presented from first year undergraduate English classes at Université Paris Cité. The students involved were majoring in language sciences, so their English classes are merely the language requirement which might be part of an undergraduate degree in any discipline. In this context, students at Paris Cité would generally be required to take between 15 and 48 hours per year of English classes in the course of their bachelor's degree. These students are not always streamed by level and are often in classes of around 30.

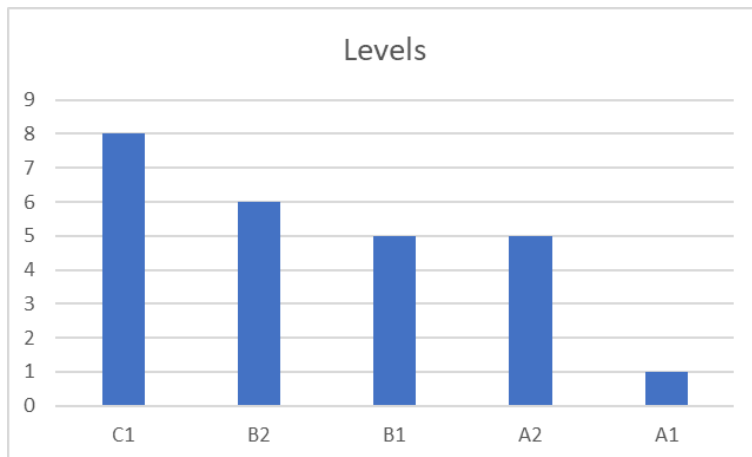


Figure 1: CEFR self-evaluated levels

Figure 1 above shows a snapshot of the self-evaluated levels of a class of 25 students according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001). Students were given the descriptors of the six levels of the CEFR and asked to identify their level. It is noticeable that while the theoretical level of a student arriving at university from a French high school is around B2, there is in fact a considerable diversity, with a number of students evaluating as a level more in line with junior high school. When asked on a scale of 1 to 100 “Do you consider that your level of English comes more from classes or more from your informal activities?”, Learners in the B and C levels on average rated their level as having been developed 76% by informal activities and only 24% by classroom learning. Interestingly the six A1-A2 students considered that 35% of their level derived from informal activities and 65% from classroom learning. Since informal practices are such a significant part of English language learning today, designing courses to encompass aspects of the wild is all the more important.

Course design

In this section, details of the design of the course entitled “Bring your Own English” will be outlined. Undergraduate students in Language Sciences at Université Paris Cité have a language requirement of 24 hours of English classes (3 ECTS) per semester in the form of a weekly two-hour class. In the first year, the course is not focused on English for specific purposes, but merely seeks to consolidate the various levels re-

ferred to above. Course contents generally focus on four skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking. In the Bring your own English course, reading materials include articles both supporting and criticizing vloggers. The choice of vlogging as a focus for the rewilding approach discussed in this paper relates to the linguistic characteristics of this type of activity. Vloggers are typically YouTube content creators who produce regular videos describing their life and discussing topics of particular interest to them. One characteristic of these vlogs is that the content creator generally speaks directly to the viewer. They are often characterized by a relatively low word count, with some vloggers using only 5000 different word types over a year of production. These two characteristics mean that vlogs are somewhat easier for non-native speakers to understand than other popular video formats such as television series. What is more, some content creators are non-native speakers of English and the themes of the vlogs can be selected by the viewer for familiar or favourite topics such as hair and makeup or gaming, leading to a high frequency of repetition of key words. These videos also contain many opportunities to see what words mean, be they gestures in applying makeup or actions and objects in games etc. In contrast, series and movies often involve higher word counts and speech is usually not addressed to the viewer. It is therefore possible to hypothesize that since following vloggers is linguistically a relatively easier exercise, it could act as a preparation for other informal practices.

The vloggers of particular interest in this study are often referred to as Studytubers, who are students making YouTube contents about their life at university and offering study tips to their subscribers. Helen Rumbelow, writing in *The Times*, suggests that the term was coined around 2018 and refers to “content creators on YouTube whose content focuses on studying, test and exam preparation, and school”. The seven Studytubers used in the class were Jack Edwards, Ruby Granger, Vee Kativhu, Eve Bennett, Zeliha Akpınar, Hailey Dollar and Thomas Arnold, who were students in a range of different disciplines, in three different countries and came from diverse backgrounds. The advice they offer includes how to make notes from reading materials, how to take notes on lectures, how to study for exams and how to balance social and study opportunities when starting university.

As well as comprehension tasks drawn from extracts from the different Studytubers, online articles adopting supportive or critical attitudes to the contents of the vlogs were also studied. Opinion-gap tasks were designed as the central activity in each two hour class, with an opportunity to exchange opinions and vote on which Studytuber gave the best advice about revision techniques for example, or which Studytuber’s experience is most similar to the learners’ own situation. In task-based learning and teaching (Ellis, 2004), task types generally fall into two categories: opinion gap, in which the task is accomplished by the learners giving their opinions on a topic and potentially voting on the outcome and information gap, in which the learners seek out the necessary information to complete the task from resources and other learners.

In terms of production tasks, it is typical in the French higher education context to ask students to make a presentation in class on a topic which interests them and invite the other students to respond. Since making such ten to fifteen minute speeches is far from the daily online experience of most students, it was considered essential to replace this production phase of the class by a task involving making vlog-style videos outside the class and posting them on the group forum of the learning management system Moodle. The students were instructed to watch several videos made by each Studytubers and then to choose one aspect of their own life to make a short video about using their smartphone. Since we live in the era of large language models such as Chat GPT, the students were told only to speak from notes, and not to read a prepared text. The pattern of posting videos and inviting others to respond by commenting was thought to more closely resemble the informal online practices of learners.

Other aspects of the weekly class designed to be more in line with informal practices included beginning each class by revising a few items from the previous week in the form of a game on the platform Kahoot and ending each week by watching music videos, usually with a frequently repeated grammar point to be identified. At the end of the twelve week course, learners were surveyed to obtain their thoughts about this learning experience. The contents of the videos they produced and the written comments were also analyzed to determine to what extent they resembled classroom production destined for a teacher or informal production destined for classmates.

Some results

Overall, reactions to the course were very positive. On the specific question of vlogging instead of making oral presentations in class, many respondents indicated that this was a less stressful experience, that it allowed for creativity and that they considered that weaker students might be able to perform well in such a task. Other recurring themes of their responses included the idea that it was good to produce the videos at home, that they learned something about video-making techniques and that the process of commenting on other videos was good for group cohesion.

The examples below are taken from a comments on a vlog on a typical Studytuber theme “my typical day at Uni”:

1. I loved your video, you're so positive in it! Now I want to try matcha tea to see if it's that bad lol.
2. You should do more vlogs !! You also motivated me a lot, thank youuu<33
3. Your video was great, and with great music 😊

Several characteristics of these comments suggest that they are addressed to the author of the video and not to the English teacher. The themes of the comments are predominantly affective, relating to the feelings and attitudes of the author and viewer. This is

also reflected in the frequent use of exclamation marks as well as the use of smileys and abbreviations.

To illustrate the contents of some of the videos produced, extract 4 below is taken from another vlog on the theme “My typical day at Uni.”

1. (Classical music overlaid on audio) So, now I’m home. I’m currently working on a grammar exam that I’m 100% sure I’m gonna fail, but, whatever, I’ll try. Not maybe as hard as I can... as I could... but, yeah, I’ll try. I’m doing some exercises, so, we’re gonna work together. (Speeded up section)

It is interesting to note that, from a technical point of view this extract includes a music track, a speeded up section, and a reference to “working together” a typical category of study vlog in which the viewer does their homework while seeing the Studytuber working. These are typical features of Studytuber vlogs. Other students also made use of captions on the screen to identify people or express emotions and also make frequent use of terms such as “like and subscribe” to indicate that they imagine that they are on a vlogging platform. Therefore it seems that the students have developed a good level of knowledge of the style of many vlogs. In terms of topic, the student in extract 4 talks more about feelings than about contents, mentioning that she thinks she will fail and that she is not trying very hard. These affective aspects would indicate that she is thinking of her peers when speaking, rather than the teacher. However the hesitation between “could” and “can” suggests that she is not completely unaware the teacher will also be viewing the video. Further analysis from the different productions and comments in this course should yield a wide range insights into the integration of informal practices in the formal context of English classes.

Conclusions

This brief paper has outlined a number of the characteristics of informal practices which may be harnessed in formal study in higher education. Beyond the context of English teaching, there may be other areas of education in which skills are predominantly learned outside the classroom. This is often the case for the learning of Japanese or Korean and may also be prevalent in computer sciences or the creative arts. There are undoubtedly many opportunities for researchers in education sciences to look into these dimensions of informal learning.

While it is possible to focus on the choice of learning materials presented in this paper, it is undoubtedly the pedagogical approach which is the most generally applicable. Emphasizing opinion-gap tasks is a key aspect of this approach, dealing with students as users of the language, not just learners of it, as is a willingness to transform production activities from in-person presentations, which suit the teacher in their management of a two-hour class, to a flipped approach in which online videos are the learner-centred focus. Experts in the field of teaching and learning often say that we are in the business of promoting skills rather than presenting knowledge. In the real

world of the classroom however, presenting knowledge is often an easier option for a tired teacher than promoting skills, since this option merely requires the teacher to address a passive audience, rather than to invite them to engage in noisy and complex problem solving which may require considerable classroom management skills. It may be time to stop thinking that a teacher has some magic pedagogical materials which will change learners' lives and to focus more on making pedagogies material to the real lives of our students out in the wild.

Biographical notes

Geoffrey Sockett is Professor of Language Sciences at Université Paris Cité. The focus of his research is how learners of English develop language skills by exposure to English-language media in informal settings. He has spoken and published widely on this topic and is the author of a widely quoted book, *The Online Informal Learning of English* (Palgrave, 2014).

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Online resources

- Jack Edwards https://www.youtube.com/@jack_edwards
- Ruby Granger <https://www.youtube.com/@RubyGranger8>
- Vee Kativhu https://www.youtube.com/@veekativhu_
- Eve Bennett <https://www.youtube.com/@RevisionWithEve>
- Zeliha Akpınar <https://www.youtube.com/@zelihaakpinar>
- Hailey Dollar <https://www.youtube.com/@HaileyDollarGoesToCollege>
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