

Young adults' experiences on different ways of learning English
as a foreign language

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Abstract

The ways in which people come into contact with and learn languages have changed drastically in recent decades due to the ever-growing influence of the internet as the most important factor. Even though English is still the most important global language, other languages are gaining more visibility in mainstream media as well, and nearly everyone at least has the chance to access any kind of content from practically anywhere in the world. Possibly because of this, it seems that the ways of language learning are shifting from formal education and conscious studying towards more incidental and casual ways of learning, for example through mainstream media. This thesis discusses the different ways of English learning in the context of European young adults who already speak English very well, and the goal was to gain an understanding on their subjective thoughts on this topic. The six participants were interviewed about their experiences on formal education and many ways of informal learning such as television, reading, video games and interacting with others in English for example. They were also asked about the effects that these things have had on their English learning and current skills in their opinion.

The results show that the more informal and incidental ways of learning, especially consuming different forms of media such television shows or video games in English, were experienced to be the most influential for these participants' English learning. Most participants did however also recognize the positive effects of formal education by noting that studying English in school has been or can be useful especially with learning the basics. Perhaps the most useful elements of informal language acquisition, such as being motivated to learn by doing something that is fun, could someday be utilized in formal education as well.

Tiivistelmä

Kielten oppimisen tavat ovat muuttuneet huomattavasti viime vuosikymmeninä internetin vaikutuksen kasvamisen myötä. Vaikka englanti on edelleen kaikkein tärkein maailmankieli, muutkin kielet ja kulttuurit ovat nykyään enemmän näkyvillä kuin ennen, koska lähes jokaisella on mahdollisuus päästä käsiksi mediasisältöihin käytännössä kaikkialta maailmasta internetin välityksellä. Vaikuttaakin siltä, että oppimistavat ovat siirtymässä kouluista ja oppikirjojen ääreltä kohti epävirallisempia ympäristöjä, jotka nykyään usein sijaitsevat verkossa. Tämä tutkielma käsittelee eurooppalaisten englantia osaavien nuorten aikuisten kokemuksia ja mielipiteitä erilaisista tavoista oppia englannin kieltä. Näitä kuutta osallistujaa haastateltiin heidän ajatuksistaan esimerkiksi englannin opetuksesta ja opiskelusta koulussa, sekä useista epävirallisemmista oppimistavoista kuten

esimerkiksi television katselusta, lukemisesta, videopelien pelaamisesta sekä keskustelemisesta englanniksi. Osallistujilta kysyttiin myös, millaisia vaikutuksia näillä eri tavoilla on heidän mielestään ollut heidän oppimiseensa ja englannin kielen taitoihin.

Tulokset osoittavat, että epäviralliset oppimistavat, erityisesti televisiosarjojen katselu tai videopelien pelaaminen englanniksi, olivat haastateltavien mielestä kaikkein hyödyllisimpiä englannin oppimisen kannalta. Suurin osa osallistujista kuitenkin myös tunnisti englannin kielen opetuksen ja opiskelun positiiviset vaikutukset sanomalla, että se on ollut tai ainakin voi olla hyödyllistä etenkin perusteiden oppimisessa. Ehkä joitakin hyödyllisiä epävirallisen oppimisen elementtejä, kuten motivaation parantaminen oppimalla jollakin hausalla tavalla, voisi joskus hyödyntää myös opetuksessa.

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1. Introduction

In the modern world, people have many different ways of coming into contact with foreign languages outside of a school environment. Through the internet, anyone can easily access cultural products such as television shows, movies, and games from anywhere in the world, contact people from the other side of the planet through social media, and you can also come across many different languages even while just watching television. Even though other languages and cultures, such as Korean through music and television shows, have been gaining more and more visibility in mainstream media recently, English is still very firmly the number one global language. Especially the young adults of today have grown up in a world where everything popular is usually in English: television shows, movies, YouTube videos, games, and all the most popular content on social media. Perhaps because of this, it looks like the ways of English learning have started to shift from formal education and conscious studying towards unconscious and incidental acquisition of the language through more informal ways. Today's young adults might indeed be one of the first generations that have had the chance to get so much exposure to the English language for such a long time through other ways than formal education in school. As stated by Sockett (2013), it is significant that nowadays the affordances of web-based communication are breaking down various linguistic and geographical boundaries which is allowing learners to engage in meaningful interactions which often leads to incidental language development.

Because of the ever-growing popularity of global online environments and the amount of time that especially the younger generations spend in them, Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) might be becoming an important topic in future research and an increasingly prominent way of learning English in addition to formal education. This topic has indeed already been studied in recent years and decades due to the ever-growing globalization and all the different ways in which the English language is a part of almost everyone's daily life today. Previous studies have shown that at least some language acquisition does indeed happen while watching subtitled television shows (d'Ydewalle & Van de Poel, 1990) and other media such as movies, music, and games (Kuppens, 2010). They show that exposure to English through consuming these kinds of media even for a short while does result in at least some learning, so it is safe to assume that more continuous exposure has some, perhaps mostly positive, effects on English learning as well.

This thesis examines the topic mostly through the participants' personal thoughts and experiences on learning through different ways, whether it happened in a classroom environment or in front of a TV or a computer. The goal is to gain an understanding of these particular participants' personal and

subjective views and experiences on different ways of English learning and acquisition. How do they think that they have learned English and how have they experienced the process themselves? What ways or habits they have experienced to be useful (or not) in their English learning journey? These are the main research questions that will be discussed in this thesis. Analyzing the interviews showed that informal language acquisition through consuming different forms of media has been especially important for these participants, along with being a part of online communities and interacting with others in English. The participants did however also think that formal education and English teaching in school has been useful as well, if perhaps with slightly different things than the informal ways of learning and acquisition.

2. Background

This thesis utilizes the theoretical framework of foreign language learning and acquisition through different ways including both formal education and various ways of informal learning, while focusing on the subjective experiences and thoughts of this group of European young adults. Some relevant theoretical concepts and ideas will be defined and discussed in this section with the help of previous research and articles that have also utilized similar concepts and discussed similar topics. First, concepts of foreign language learning and acquisition will be discussed, and then the different ways of learning and acquisition will be defined from the point of view of this thesis.

Foreign language learning (FLL) and acquisition are especially important concepts for this thesis. These phenomena are being studied and examined especially from the angle of incidental learning and acquisition, even though learning consciously and intentionally through studying and formal education will be discussed as well. It should be noted that even though (foreign) language learning and language acquisition are concepts that are close together and often go hand in hand, they are separate and do have differences that should be considered when studying this topic. In this thesis, language learning is usually used as an umbrella term to refer to any language learning regardless of where or how it has happened or if it has been intentional or not, and sometimes more specifically as well when talking about conscious studying and learning. Language acquisition on the other hand is used to refer to learning that has happened more incidentally, unconsciously and without the goal of learning through things in the person's environment, which can be almost anything where the person comes into some kind of contact with the language. This difference between these two concepts was defined by Ringbom as early as 1980, when he wrote that "acquisition and learning refer to the learning process inside the learner, the degree of consciousness with which he learns" (p. 37), learning being the more conscious process of the two. This distinction between the concepts will be the one used in this thesis as well.

The different ways of learning and acquisition that will be covered in the interviews and that will also be discussed and examined more generally later in this thesis are formal education (school, other language courses, etc.), real life and online interactions (through audio or text), television shows, movies, internet videos, music, reading, and playing games. This thesis is especially interested in studying what the participants think about the more informal ways of learning and how it compares to formal education and teaching in their minds, as nowadays learning often happens incidentally and without planning outside of a controlled classroom environment. This phenomenon is known as Informal (language) Learning (IL) and as stated by Sockett (2013), it has drawn attention to the fact that learners often "become involved in informal target language practices such as chatting or social

networking online, downloading or streaming original version television series, and choosing music in English” (p. 48). Sockett (2013) also states that this is generally incidental and not purposeful in terms of learning since the intention of these activities is communication or enjoyment rather than language learning.

In addition to Informal Learning, the more specific concept of Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) has been defined by Toffoli and Sockett (2015) as a process which is driven by the intention to communicate, while language learning is only an unintentional by-product of this. Toffoli and Sockett (2015) also state that the study of OILE seeks to identify language development through different online activities such as social networking, streaming or downloading television shows or films, e-mailing, blogging, chatting, conversing and participating in online forums, listening to music and web browsing in English. Because these online ways of coming into contact with languages have become so prominent, they are important from the point of view of this thesis as well.

3. Research materials and methods

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection method of this thesis. Most of the participants were not chosen or asked to participate directly, but information about this study was posted in a larger group chat, where everyone who was interested in participating could freely announce so. The interview questions were only in English, but the participants could choose to answer in a different language, if such a choice was possible. This section will first discuss the participants of this study, then the interviews, and then briefly cover the ethical matters related to data collection.

3.1 Participants

There were six participants that took part in the interviews, all of whom are young adults 20 to 25 years old. The participants come from different European countries: two of them are from Portugal, two from France, one from Netherlands and one from Finland, and they are all non-native speakers of English. While most of the participants were not deliberately chosen, almost all of them came from within a larger group that was intentionally picked since it was known to have members who know English quite well. The number of interviewees was also not explicitly decided, as everyone could freely announce that they wanted to participate after hearing about the study and all the volunteers were allowed to participate. In addition to the other five, one participant was asked directly if they wanted to take part in the study.

The participants' personal background was not considered relevant for this study unless something happened to come up during the interviews, and the only piece of personal information they were asked to provide was their age. However, judging by previous interactions with the participants, and with some of them from their academic career, it can be said that all of their English skills are at a very good level at least in writing as well as reading and listening comprehension. It is also worth noting that all of the participants also currently spend and have spent quite a lot of time online as a part of different communities and are well-acquainted with internet culture.

3.2 Interviews

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection method, because it is the best way to get to know the participants' subjective experiences and opinions. As noted by Thille, Rotteau and Webster (2021) “[q]ualitative semi-structured interviews can help researchers gain an

understanding of the world as it is lived in and experienced by participants” (p. 545), which is exactly the goal of this study. Interviews were semi-structured especially because of the possibility to go into further detail with topics that were important for that particular participant’s experiences at any point in the interview. The interviews were analyzed by performing a qualitative content analysis which was based on the prominent themes and topics that were discussed in them.

The interviews consisted of 10 pre-written main questions or topics, but the participants could freely talk about anything that came to mind about the topic, and they were often asked to elaborate further on some points they brought up. The participants were asked about their experiences and opinions on learning through formal education, real life or online interactions in English, watching television shows, movies or internet videos, playing games, listening to music, reading, and social media usage for example. There were also questions about if the participants have had to put conscious effort into learning English or certain skills, such as pronunciation, or if learning has always come very naturally and effortlessly to them. Interview questions can be found in the appendix, but it only includes the main questions or topics covered in the interviews which were used more as a guideline than a set script. If the participants said yes to the main question, they were also asked about their opinion on its significance and usefulness to their learning and to elaborate on their answers with how, why, what and when questions. Aside from the questions related to their learning experiences, the participants were also asked about their age, and, if they were not Finnish, to talk a bit more about general things in their language environment, such as the length of formal English education in their country and dubbing of television shows or movies for example.

All interviews except one, which was face to face, were carried out in an online environment through a voice call, and all of the interviews were recorded audio only, no video was used. The interviews were relatively short due to the number of interviewees, lasting for approximately 20 to 30 minutes per participant.

3.3 Research ethics

All participants were given a privacy notice, which included information about this study, the participants rights, and collecting, using, storing, and destroying the data which the participants provided. It also included the contact information of the data controller and principal investigator, and the contact information of the Data Protection Ombudsman’s Office for lodging a complaint. All participants accepted the terms presented in the privacy notice and signed a consent form. The audio recordings of every interview were stored in password protected private devices, and no one else but

the data controller, who is also the principal investigator, had access to them at any point during the study. The recordings will be deleted after receiving a grade from this thesis.

4. Different ways of English learning

This section focuses on discussing the participants' answers on the topics that were covered in the interviews. First subsection takes a look at the participants' thoughts and experiences about formal education and English teaching, and in the next section, which is divided into further subsections for the most important themes, informal ways of learning and acquisition will be covered. Lastly, the participants' experiences about conscious studying and more effortless learning of English will be discussed.

4.1 Formal education

In the beginning of the interviews, the participants were asked about their thoughts on formal English education in general: what was English teaching like in school and what do they think about the usefulness of it towards their current English skills, and what kind of things about English did they learn in school? Most participants had at least somewhat similar opinions towards formal education, but since the way that English is taught can differ quite drastically from country to country, their experiences particularly about the usefulness of English teaching in school varied quite a lot depending on where they are from. For example, the two French interviewees were among the people who immediately said that studying English in school was not very useful for them personally, and they presented criticism towards the quality of teaching. On the other hand, participants from other countries, especially Finland and Netherlands, had more positive experiences about studying English in school.

A common answer to the questions about formal education was that the participants thought that language acquisition through informal ways, such as consuming different forms of media or interacting with other people online, had generally contributed more to their English learning and current good English skills than English teaching had in school. A few participants thought that already being familiar with English before starting it in school, perhaps through cartoons for example, probably made learning it in school easier. Most of them said in one way or another that they never struggled with English in school and that they have "always been quite good at it". However, many participants did also note that formal education and studying English in school was definitely useful with some more specific things that cannot as easily be learned through acquisition, such as grammar, punctuation or spelling for example. According to most participants, English teaching in school definitely was not completely useless as they learned many things in class. Some participants also said that before university, starting to chat with online friends in English, or whenever they started to

use English orally more often, English class was usually the only place where they got to actually speak English and practice their speaking skills.

One participant also noted that even though studying English in school was not the most important or useful way of learning for them personally, formal education is still very important. They said that formal education can be useful especially with learning the basics and gaining an elementary understanding of the language, even though they also noted that someone probably would not know English very well by *only* learning it in school. It should be kept in mind that this is only this one person's experience of the school system in their home country Portugal, but this statement is probably applicable to other places in Europe as well. Some other participants did indeed share this thought about formal education being good for getting to know the basics of the language, and that after learning those, other ways of learning and acquisition can be helpful in becoming more fluent. It should also be noted that these 20- to 25-year-old participants are no longer a part of the basic education system so some changes may have already happened in English teaching, which means that their opinions may not be indicative of the current state of formal education.

4.2 Informal learning and acquisition

These following subsections will cover all the more informal and incidental ways of English language acquisition that the participants were asked about in the interviews, such as interactions, consuming different pieces of media (including television series, movies, online video content, games, reading, music...), and also the use of different social media platforms.

4.2.1 Interactions in English

To the question about real life and online interactions with other people in English, many participants answered that they did not have much contact or many interactions with people who spoke English to them or who they would have spoken English to when they were younger and still learning English. Their interactions in English seemed to have often been limited to only English classes in school until an older age. Many participants did however note that interacting with others can be very useful and even the small interactions they had with others in online environments for example left an impression on them while they were still learning. Most of them just simply did not have a proper chance to interact with others in English a lot outside of school, and especially not face to face. Conversing through text was definitely a more common way of interaction for these participants, but that was

also something that they started doing a bit later and not while they were still learning and not as good in English yet. There was only one participant who explicitly said that interacting with others in group chats and such noticeably helped them to learn English.

However, a few participants did have interactions with people who they spoke English with, and they thought that those interactions were helpful to their learning. For example, a participant had a teacher in middle school who was a native English speaker, and this participant thought that speaking with and listening to this teacher really helped them to understand the natural flow of sentences in English. Couple of participants also had had some kind of language exchange or pen pal programs during middle or high school where they could interact with people in English through letters or face to face, and they both thought that it had a positive impact on their learning. One participant also noted that those kind of things had helped them especially with learning to write and speak more naturally in English, and that it had given them more confidence in their skills. These things seemed to have been more or less the extent of interactions in English that the participants had had, and none of them had for example lived in a household where English was spoken regularly by their family members, in which case English would have perhaps been more of a second language rather than a foreign language. The lack of people who the participants could have spoken English with also ties into the point about mostly learning English by only listening to or reading it and not actively using it themselves. This point and its consequences will be discussed more in the following subsections.

4.2.2 Mainstream media

This subsection will cover the participants' most important answers to the questions about their mainstream media consuming in English and their experiences about the usefulness of it. First it will cover perhaps the most important ways of learning according to most participants, which were often related to TV or movies as well as other video content and video games. After that it will discuss reading and music, which were also considered useful by some participants but perhaps not quite on the same scale as watching something or playing video games.

These participants had quite a lot of learning experiences related to consuming mainstream media such as television shows, movies, YouTube content or video games due to their hobbies and interests. Most of them did indeed say that consuming different types of media has probably been the most important thing for their English language learning. Many participants said that they had watched cartoons on Cartoon Network for example or Disney Channel shows in English but subtitled in their native language when they were young. They thought that these things had at least familiarized them

with the language even if they did not yet exactly pay attention to the language or learn anything concrete. Becoming familiar with the language before starting it in school probably did make learning English later in school or through other ways easier in their opinion. Almost every participant said that they have always been quite good at English in school and usually they were already familiar with the things that were being taught in class. Many participants said that when they got a bit older, they started to get interested in content that was not available or even subtitled in their language, such as anime or online content on YouTube for example, so they had to start relying more and more on their English skills to keep watching the content that they were interested in. The participants that were interested in this kind of content said that watching YouTube in English helped them to learn the casual language that many YouTubers use, and that watching English subtitled anime where the subtitles often go by very quickly helped to improve their reading speed and comprehension. The importance of the internet as a way of coming into contact with English can really be seen in these participant's experiences: practically all of them came into contact with English through the internet in some way, since so many things are easily available on the internet nowadays.

Video games are another popular form of media that especially the younger generations are interested in, and unlike most television shows and movies, they are perhaps not as often available in any other language than English, especially back when the participants of this study were younger. As one participant said, they had to rely quite a lot on English to entertain themselves since a lot of the content they were interested in was only available in English or subtitled in English. The participants who said that they had been into video games when they were younger told that they had indeed been at least exposed to English through games which had helped them to learn. The social aspects of playing video games or interacting with other people through them did not come up much with these participants, as they said that their learning experiences were mostly related to the English language used in the game itself. Perhaps more social games were not as popular back then or these participants just happened to be more interested in single player games which did not require them to interact with other players. For some, video games that younger children can play too, such as Pokémon or Minecraft, may have even been the first exposure to English they ever had. One participant said that even though Minecraft for example only has very simple and random pieces of vocabulary, such as cobblestone or torch, those random words were really burned into every Minecraft player's mind back then. Even though those single words might not be very useful in real life conversations, some learning did happen through playing certain video games regardless.

Television shows, movies, other types of video content and games seemed to have been the most important ways of English learning for the participants, so these other ways of informal and incidental

English learning through reading and music were not talked about in the interviews quite as much or as extensively. Most participants answered that they did not find reading or music especially significant to their learning, and a common answer to the question about reading different things in English was that they did not exactly read anything in English when they were younger and still learning the language. Many participants, if they were or are interested in reading at all, said that they only started reading more in English when they were older and already had quite a good understanding of the language, perhaps around high school according to one participant. Reading did not seem to have had a big impact on their learning process, even though the participants did often note that reading is still a good way of improving things such as vocabulary or learning to use the language more naturally. However, there were also a few participants who had interesting learning experiences with reading and who thought that reading different things, and perhaps even writing stories themselves, has been important for their learning.

One participant told that when they were younger and very into the Harry Potter books, they had gotten the original English editions after reading the translations in their native language Portuguese a lot. The participant was apparently not very good at English yet at that time, so in order to read the English editions, they started to read in English by going through the books with the Portuguese editions at hand, so that they could check words or expressions that they did not quite understand in English. This sounds like a very good way to learn vocabulary for example, and this participant said that their reading comprehension improved quickly and by the third book they did not really need the help of the Portuguese editions anymore. After the Harry Potter books had worked as a gateway, this participant started to read more and more in English after gaining the skills and confidence to be able to.

Another participant who said that they had read a lot of books or other things, in this case fanfiction, in English and later even written some themselves also thought that this has been useful for their learning. Like the other participant, they also said that reading helped a lot with learning vocabulary especially. When they started reading, there were a lot of words or phrases that they did not quite understand but by powering through they started to gradually understand more and more. This kind of “powering through even though you do not quite understand” approach came up when talking about watching television shows in English or anime subtitled in English as well. When something is interesting, it is easy to keep at it even though it can be difficult and judging by what these participants have said, learning like this can be very effective as well.

The interviews also included a question about listening to music in English, even though it was not exactly assumed that many participants would find it to have been especially useful. When asked,

most participants indeed said that they had not considered the effects of music listening to their language skills before. Most of them thought that it had not contributed to their skills, at least not very noticeably. Only one participant, who had been a part of a band as the singer, thought that music as a hobby, though more broadly than just through listening, had definitely helped them with getting better at English pronunciation at least. This participant also thought that listening to English music a lot when growing up could have had an effect on listening comprehension as well for example, but that the exact effects are difficult to estimate. They and another participant also remarked that it is easier to pay attention to the language when consuming media content, while with music their focus has usually been mostly on other things than the lyrics. Another participant said that even though they themselves probably did not listen to music in English enough for it to have a significant effect to their skills, they still think that it definitely can be useful if you listen to it a lot starting from a young age. This participant said that they know people who have listened and still listen to a lot of music in English and know a lot of lyrics even though they can be quite complex. They thought that this can be useful especially when combined with other ways of learning, even though music listening alone probably does not have a significant effect to anyone's general English skills.

Many participants also mentioned that because they mostly learned English through consuming media such as television shows, games, and books for example, they easily gained very good skills of understanding both spoken and written English and writing in English themselves. However, this has caused them to struggle a bit more with expressing themselves while speaking the language, since many of them did not have a chance to interact much and get used to talking in English. As one participant put it, “the way I learned English was watching PewDiePie or random people play Minecraft on YouTube in 2013”, and they also remarked that not really actively speaking in English for a long time was quite a handicap for them in terms of their oral English skills. This finding will be discussed in more detail in section 4.3.

4.2.3 Social media

The participants were asked to talk a bit about their social media use as well: did they or do they still use most social media platforms more in English or their native language, or perhaps even another language altogether, and do they think that social media usage has contributed to their English learning? The participants generally thought that social media was not among the things that they have experienced to be especially useful, even though most participants said that they have used and still use most social media platforms mostly in English if they use social media much at all. Though

one participant noted that at least for them, that excludes those platforms where you appear “as yourself” and interact with your family or other people you know in real life such as Facebook for example, where they use their native language. At least one participant even said that they actively avoid content in their native language on some platforms where they want to keep their online life and real life separate. A few participants also noted that perhaps the reason for not viewing social media use as very useful is that when they were younger and still learning English, social media was not as big of a thing as it is today. Many of them only started to use different platforms especially in English only later when they were already quite good in the language.

However, one participant did say that even though they speak with their real-life friends in their native language when talking face to face, on social media and online messaging apps they usually talk in English. This came up with other participants as well who said that they strongly associate English with online platforms and social media, not face-to-face interactions. Many of them said that they feel more comfortable with using English rather than their native language when talking over text, even though they might still prefer their native language and feel more comfortable expressing themselves with it in a face-to-face conversation. This also shows the importance of internet and especially the effects it has had on globalization and making English even more of a global language that almost everyone can speak on a certain level at least. As one participant remarked, English is such a global language that you use it everywhere with everyone, so it has just been easier for them to always use it when texting. Even though social media usage in English has not been especially important for most participants, maybe the younger generations who are children and teenagers today might learn more from it because they have started to use the platforms more from a younger age.

4.3 Conscious effort in learning English?

The participants were also asked about how they experienced their English learning process in terms of conscious studying and effortless unconscious acquisition. Do they think that they had to put a lot of conscious effort into studying English to get to where they are now, or has learning always come very naturally to them so that they did not ever have to struggle much with it? Most of the participants were indeed of the opinion that they never exactly studied English with the goal of learning in mind, and their learning mostly happened unconsciously through informal and often also incidental acquisition. However, more than half of the participants said that speaking English has definitely been the most difficult part for them and that is the thing that they have had to put most effort and practice in. This may be a consequence of mostly learning English by consuming different things and not

using the language themselves as much at least in the beginning of their learning. This has led to them having a very good general understanding of English in its various forms, but not speaking it as well or as confidently even though they probably do have more than enough knowledge about the language to be able to do it in theory. Interestingly, this seems to have something to do with the participants' native language at least in some cases. A participant from Netherlands said that they have never really struggled with speaking in English despite apparently not interacting with anyone in English any more than the other participants. They attributed this to the Dutch language having some similarities with English in terms of pronunciation and such, and they said that speaking has always felt quite natural to them. It is true that from all the native languages of the participants, Dutch is indeed the most closely related to English as the only other Germanic language, so the Dutch participant being the one that finds speaking to be easy makes quite a lot of sense.

5. Discussion

Examining the findings showed that nearly all of the different ways of learning covered in the interviews were significant for these people's English learning in one way or another. Especially the informal ways of learning and more specifically incidental language acquisition was important for these participants, many of whom came into contact with the English language through their hobbies in their free time. Even though these are only the opinions of these particular participants, which should be kept in mind while examining and discussing the findings, it is a reasonable conclusion to make that different ways of online learning have become very important for the younger generations of today. The findings are also largely in line with what has been found in previous research on similar topics and they are reinforcing them in this context of European young adults who are fluent in English. For example, especially d'Ydewalle and Van de Poel (1990) and Kuppens (2010) had very similar results, and their findings support the findings made by this thesis. They have both proven in their studies related to incidental foreign language acquisition through media exposure that at least some learning and acquisition does happen even during a short exposure to the target language (d'Ydewalle & Van de Poel, 1990). They have also shown that people who frequently watched television shows and movies subtitled in English performed significantly better in oral translation tests (Kuppens, 2010).

The subjectiveness of this study's findings should also be kept in mind, as it can be difficult to evaluate one's own learning and where and how the learning happened after the process is already over. Some participants in this study did indeed find it a bit difficult to answer some questions about their learning, and as Sockett (2013) states, especially OILE is an individualized phenomenon, and since it often takes place within communities which have an element of privacy, it is somewhat more difficult to study in general than for example classroom learning phenomena where the goal of learning is present at all times. Sockett's (2013) study did however prove that learning is taking place in different informal online settings which supports what this thesis is suggesting as well. However, learning through interactions was in an important role in Sockett's (2013) study, but it was not experienced to be quite as important by the participants of this study even though they did recognize its potential benefits.

This study and many previous ones suggest that in addition to formal English education, the more informal ways of learning and acquisition such as media consumption, video games, or interacting with others in English to name a few, are important and apparently also quite effective ways of learning as well. This raises the question whether these ways of learning could be applied in or implemented into English teaching and formal education in some ways? Nowadays, or at least some

five years ago, the formal education and teaching of English in middle and high school here in Finland was quite focused only on vocabulary and grammar, and there was not much focus on for example practicing natural conversations or interactions in English or learning oral skills in general. This seems to be quite country specific though, as for example the Dutch participant mentioned in the interview that English teaching in their school was more literature focused and often just consisted of reading books in English and then discussing them. This sounds very different from what English teaching is, or was, like here in Finland.

Perhaps more various learning methods that came up in the interviews, such as consuming media in English or interacting with others in English, could be utilized in formal education to teach the students more varied and practical skills related to English and familiarizing them with more natural language than the language used in textbooks. Something like this is probably difficult to execute in practice though, as people in class might be on very different levels with their English skills and what would work for the advanced students who want to become more fluent probably would not work for those who still need more practice with the basics. Having specified teaching based on the person's skill level would probably be great for their learning but planning and giving personalized teaching for every student would require an unreasonable amount of resources from the teachers and the school system. This study did however show that informal ways of learning can generate interesting and beneficial learning experiences. In the interviews, one participant told an interesting story about how they started to read in English by first going through the English editions of Harry Potter books with the Portuguese, their native language, editions at hand and going back and forth to check parts that they did not yet quite understand in English. Even though this participant's goal was to just read their favorite books in a new way, something like this could perhaps be utilized as an actual studying method. If it is something that learner is interested in and motivated to do, perhaps studying like that with the goal of learning in mind can also feel more motivating and fun, which inspires learning.

Something that might also be interesting to consider while examining the findings, and when considering previous research or possible future research, is the question if some people are just naturally better at learning languages faster and with less effort than others, or if everyone has the same potential but the differences in learning depend on chance and the person's environment. Are for example the participants of this study very good at English because of the things that were discussed in the interviews or because they are naturally better at "absorbing" the language than other people even though they maybe have had the same amount of exposure? When trying to see if this kind of claim or "myth" has already been proven one way or another, I could find a study by Chai, et al. (2016) where the results suggest that a person's capacity to learn a second language can indeed be

predicted by their intrinsic functional connectivity within the language network in their brain. Nowadays practically everyone has at least the chance to become familiar with English through the internet, and the younger generations' general English proficiency seems to be better than their elders'. This is presumably a consequence of the growing influence of the internet and globalization, but then why exactly are some people still noticeably better in English than others? In this study it could be seen that all the participants had very different ways of learning English where some of them had more contact with the language while some had less and through different ways, but all of them are still at a near native level with their English skills. Some of them thought that things that were difficult for others were easy for them, even though nothing in their answers immediately explained that. Of course, all of the differences between the participants' ways of learning cannot be seen through the interviews, so through this study alone it is quite impossible to find out if the differences in language learning and skills are the cause of biological differences or differences in their environments for example.

6. Conclusion

The research questions that this thesis addressed were how the participants think that they have learned English, how have they experienced the process themselves, and what ways or habits they may have experienced to be important and useful in their English learning journey. To summarize, the participants thought that informal ways of learning, often through mainstream media for example, have been the most important ways of learning English in their experience, but they also pointed out that the significance of formal education should not be ignored either. The experiences on formal education on the other hand varied quite a lot depending on the quality of teaching in the participants home country. The differences between the language environments in different countries should also be considered when examining the results of this study. In conclusion, the most important findings were that the participants thought that informal learning, and especially consuming different forms of mainstream media, has been very useful for their English learning. However, formal education was usually considered to be useful as well with certain things at least.

In addition to these findings, another interesting one was that the participants' thoughts on formal education differed significantly depending on their home country, as there seems to be quite a lot of variation in the quality of English teaching even between different European countries. Another thing was that even though most of the participants said that they have never put much effort into learning English because it has mostly come very naturally to them, learning to speak English has been the most difficult thing for many of them and it has required conscious practicing especially with pronunciation. Some of the participants are still a bit insecure about talking in English even though they are very fluent when writing for example, but this seems to also depend on the person's native language. In conclusion, informal ways of learning and incidental language acquisition, especially online or related to mainstream media, seem to be very important for the language learning of today's young adults who have and still consume a lot of media and spend quite a lot of time in online platforms and communities. Almost every participant said that in general, learning English happened mostly naturally by unconscious acquisition and without much effort from themselves. Generally, the participants did however also recognize the positive effects and the importance of conscious studying and practice.

This study does have certain limitations in terms of making conclusions especially. It is difficult and probably not very meaningful either to make general conclusions, about the whole age group for example, based on the results of only this study. The number of participants was relatively small, and they were chosen from within a certain group that was known to have people who probably had interesting learning experiences with English and who would like to talk about said experiences. The

results could easily differ quite a lot from what was found in this study if the same study was conducted with different people from different countries or if they were from a different community in which coming into contact with English through their hobbies is not as common. However, the goal and purpose of this thesis was to just get to know these particular participants' opinions on their learning experiences, and not use these findings as a basis for any broad conclusions. It was to be expected that a small-scale study has small scale findings, which are already valuable on their own. Some conclusions could still be drawn especially when comparing these results to previous research on this topic and seeing how they correlate with each other. The findings of this study are indeed reinforcing findings that have already been made in previous studies.

Regarding future research ideas, it could be interesting to conduct something similar as this study, but with a more comparative approach by using two different groups of participants. Since all of this study's participants' English skills were already at a very good level, the new group could consist of people who are not as fluent in the language, so that the study could take a look at what these two groups may have done differently during their English learning and how their learning experiences might differ. As already mentioned in the earlier discussion section, it is quite impossible to find out where the differences in language learning and skills come from, so it might be interesting to take a closer look into that by comparing two different groups of people. Another interesting topic that could be studied in the future is the possible ways in which informal ways of language learning and acquisition could perhaps be implemented into formal education. Middle or high school students could perhaps be asked about their thoughts on the topic and how they think that English teaching in school could be improved and made more versatile and motivating.

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Appendix – Interview questions

How old are you?

What do you think about English formal education and its usefulness? What was English teaching like in school? At what grade did it start and how long did it continue?

Did you have interactions in English in real life or online when you were younger and still only learning English?

Did you watch television shows, movies, videos, etc. that were in English when you were younger? Are English language shows or movies etc. often dubbed in your country, or did they have subtitles?

Did you read books, comics, fanfiction etc. in English when you were younger?

If you listened to music in English, do you think it may have been useful in your learning process?

Did you play games in English when you were younger?

Do or did you use social media more in English or in your native language?

Have you ever had to put conscious effort into learning English or some specific language skills, or has it always come very naturally and effortlessly to you in school or otherwise?

Any other general thoughts about formal education and other ways of learning and acquisition? Any other ways of learning that have been important or useful to you?